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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001



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34 The flavors of northeast Spain enliven an easy summer menu.

TIPE AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001 ISSUE 46





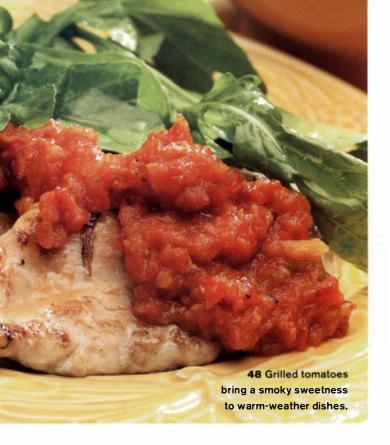
58 Karen Barker turns sweet plums upside down in a moist, tender cake.

DEPARTMENTS

- 6 Contributors
- 8 Letters
- 14 At the Market
- 16 Q&A
- 18 Enjoying Wine Find a wonderful food partner in crisp Sauvignon Blanc
- 22 Cuisines
 Barbecuing northern
 Mexico style
- 26 Tasted & Tested
- 28 **Technique Class**Taste your way to
 the perfect fruit sorbet
- 30 **Kitchen Detail**Adding work space in a pinch
- 32 Tips

- 80 **Basics** Making herb vinegars; freezing berries; hardwood charcoal vs. briquettes
- 82 Food Science
 Getting the texture you want when cooking with fresh fruit
- 84 Sources
- 88 Advertiser Index
- 89 Recipe & Technique Index
- 89 Nutrition Information
- 90 Quick & Delicious
 Steamed fish in a flash
- 92 Artisan Foods Hand-farmed and custom-grown

pages: bottom left, Amy Albert; bottom right, Martha Holmberg; all others, Scott Phillips.



ARTICLES

34 A Casual Menu from Northeast Spain by Bill Devin

Baked chicken with crisp, garlicky skin and lemon-sage flavor is the delicious centerpiece of this homey Catalan meal

40 The Juiciest Grilled Pork Chops

by Bruce Aidells

Brining helps lean pork taste juicy, while rubs, pastes, and marinades boost flavor

46 Caesar Salad

by Ana Sortun

Use a mortar and pestle or your chef's knife to make a creamy garlic paste—the base for a smooth, zesty dressing

48 High Heat is Best for Grilling Tomatoes by Joanne Weir

Fire-charred tomatoes give soup, salsa, and pasta an irresistible smoky-sweet flavor

53 Tangy Feta Cheese is Surprisingly Versatile

by Daphne Zepos

Buy it in blocks, brine it to alter its texture, and add it to salads, stuffings, and pastas

58 Show Off Plums in Two Summer Desserts

by Karen Barker & Claudia Fleming; compiled by Amy Albert

How to make the most of summer's plums? We asked two pastry chefs for their inspiration

62 Discover the Sweetness of Leeks

by David Tanis

Sauté, simmer, or grill leeks to bring out their velvety texture and uniquely complex flavor

66 A Great Way to Cook Fresh Tuna

by Lisa Hanauer

Transform the flavor and texture of this meaty fish by gently cooking it in olive oil, and then enjoy it in pastas and salads

71 Consider a Stir-Fry Pan Instead of a Wok

by Barbara Tropp

A wok may be traditional, but the newer, flat-bottom stir-fry pans work better on most stoves

74 How to Bake a Double-Crust Fruit Pie

by Carolyn Weil

An all-butter dough and a light touch give you the flakiest crust that's perfectly balanced with the fruit filling



74 Great pies start with plump, ripe berries.



CONTRIBUTORS



Karen Barker ("Plum Desserts," p. 58) is pastry chef and co-owner (along with her husband, Ben) of Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina. In 1999, she won Bon Appetit's Best Pastry Chef Award and has been nominated several times for the James Beard Award for best pastry

chef. Karen and Ben wrote *Not Afraid of Flavor: Recipes from Magnolia Grill.* She trained at the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, New York.



Claudia Fleming ("Plum Desserts," p. 58) found her way into the restaurant world while supporting herself as a dancer but eventually dove full-time into pastry making and went to Paris to study. Claudia has worked in some of New York's top kitchens and for the past seven years, she has been the pastry chef

at Gramercy Tavern in New York City. In 2000, Claudia won the James Beard Award for best pastry chef. Her book, *The Last Course: Desserts from Gramercy Tavern*, is due out in October.

Bill Devin ("Catalan Menu," p. 34) worked in a Manhattan restaurant and went to cooking school in New Jersey, but he says his real

learning came about through trial and error and by watching Julia Child reruns on public television. While getting a master's degree in international relations, Bill met his Catalan wife, decided



to move to Spain, and once again found himself back in the food world, this time as a specialty foods exporter.

Bruce Aidells ("Pork Chops," p. 40) made a national name for himself as the owner of Aidells Sausage Company, which he founded in 1983. Since then he has written and co-written several cookbooks, including *The Complete Meat Cookbook* and the meat and poultry chapters of the recently revised *Joy of Cooking*. Bruce earned a Ph.D. in biology be-



fore realizing that he'd rather spend his time in the kitchen than in the lab. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, Nancy Oakes, the awardwinning chef-owner of Boulevard restaurant.

Ana Sortun ("Caesar Salad," p. 46) is a shining star among Boston area chefs as the chef-owner of her new restaurant, Oleana, in

Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ana studied in France at La Varenne cooking school and l'Acadamie du Vin and apprenticed in restaurants in Spain, Turkey, Italy, and France, before she moved to Boston in 1990.

Since writing her first cookbook in 1994 (From Tapas to Meze), Joanne Weir ("Grilled Tomatoes", p. 48) has written more than a dozen more, including her two latest, Weir Cooking in the Wine Country, and Joanne Weir's More Cooking in the Wine Country, companions to her popular television series, now in its second season on public television. Tomatoes are especially near to her heart, since she developed 250 tomato recipes for her 1998 book, You Say Tomato.

As former cheese director for Campton Place Restaurant in San Francisco, **Daphne Zepos** ("Feta," p. 53) earned national recognition for the restaurant's cheese course and wine and cheese pairings. Daphne trained at Neal's Yard Dairy in London, studied cheesemaking throughout Europe, and has done extensive research on mountain cheeses made by shepherds in the Pyrenees, Alps, and Balkans. She is now a cheese consultant and lecturer and is writing a book about—what else?—cheese.

David Tanis ("Leeks," p. 62) co-wrote the Chez Panisse Café Cookbook and wrote Corn: A Country Garden Cookbook. David was the chef at Café Escalera in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which received much acclaim. He's now co-chef of the downstairs kitchen

at Chez Panisse in Berkeley and is at work on a new book.

Lisa Hanauer ("Tuna Confit," p. 66) is a former chef-restaurateur who is now a food writer. Before owning Café Chêneville in Oakland, California, in the mid '90s, Lisa worked at Oliveto and Square One; she has also catered and taught cooking classes. She lives in Oakland.

A Chinese scholar turned Chinese cook, **Barbara Tropp** ("Stir-Fry Pans," p. 71) was the chef-owner of China Moon in San Francisco for eleven years. Liberated from restaurant ownership, Barbara is now an active restaurant consultant in the U.S. and China, as well as a teacher and writer. She's the author of *The Modern Art of Chinese Cooking* and *China Moon Cookbook*.

Carolyn Weil ("Double-Crust Fruit Pies," p. 74) was the first pastry chef at Jeremiah



Tower's groundbreaking restaurant, Stars, in San Francisco. She then opened her own bakery in Berkeley, California—The Bakeshop—which received national acclaim. Carolyn

now focuses on making baking approachable for home cooks by teaching, writing, and appearing on radio and television. She's a contributor to *The Collective Wisdom of the Bakers Dozen*, which is due out in November.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Reading your recipes, wondering about your pot lids

The deadline for our Reader Recipe Contest has passed, and the editorial staff has begun the fascinating process of evaluating the entries to pick the finalists. We always sensed that our readership was a skilled bunch of cooks, and the stacks and stacks of delicious-sounding recipes now on our desks just confirm it. The winning recipes will be featured in our February/March 2002 issue, so stay tuned.

A few of us on the staffare in the process of remodeling our kitchens, and as we discuss our progress over morning coffee, the topic that comes up more than surfaces or appliances is organization: How and where are you going to arrange the essential tools and ingredients? This question is also at the heart of our new department, Kitchen Detail, and we want to invite all of you to contribute your ideas, opinions, and successful innovations. (See p. 30 for this issue's column featuring pull-out surfaces.) Upcoming categories that still are open for submissions include baking stations, clean-up areas (everything from drying racks to cool faucets), pot

lid storage, and stove area improvements. Send your ideas to Kitchen Detail, Fine Cooking, P.O. Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506 or e-mail us at fc@taunton.com.

And don't forget to sign up for our California Experience—we've still got room, though the special hands-on classes at Cakebread Cellars are already sold out (you guys will have fun with Brian Streeter!). Anyone harboring the fantasy of becoming a winemaker should be sure to go for the special Jordan Vineyards class, where you can try your hand at blending world-class Cabs. And of course the chef fantasies that many of us have will be indulged during our day of classes at the CIA Greystone, possibly the most beautiful professional cooking school in the world. See the inside back cover of this issue for details.

Did you pick the wrong pepper?

In "Getting Acquainted with Fresh Hot Chiles," (Fine Cooking #43, p. 12), I was only half-surprised to see the pasilla chile pictured as a green chile. The pasilla is not a fresh green chile. It is the dried form of a chilacas chile and is brownish black in color, 5 to

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6 inches long, and about 1½ inches wide. Reference *The Santa Fe School of Cooking Cookbook*, by Susan Curtis, the *Red Chile Bible*, by Kathleen Hansen & Audrey Jenkins, and *The Food of Santa Fe*, by David De Witt & Nancy Gerlach. I have lived in the Southwest for thirty years and have yet to see a chilacas chile in a mainstream supermarket. The green chile that is common in the markets and almost always mislabeled as a pasilla is the poblano chile. Many of those who work in these markets recognize the mislabeling, yet it persists.

—Thomas W. Geoghegan, Green Valley, AZ



...around the country

July 17-20: Contributing editor Molly

Stevens teaches classes at Sur La Table stores in Los Gatos (July 17), and Berkeley, California (July 18), and in Kirkland, Washington (July 20). Call 206/682-7175 for info. July 17-20: Editor Martha Holmberg and assistant editor Jennifer Armentrout head west to teach classes at the Cooking School of Aspen (July 17-18; call 970/920-1879 for info); and at the Cook Street School of Fine Cooking in Denver (July 19-20; call 303/308-9300 for info).

August 4-5: Fox Run Vineyards on Seneca Lake near Geneva, New York, is the setting for a Garlic Festival, where senior editor Amy Albert will participate in a garlic comparison tasting. For info, call 800/636-9786.

August 20-22: Contributing editor Molly Stevens will be in the St. Louis area to teach classes at Dierberg's Markets at Southroads, Mid Rivers, West Oak, and Clarkson. Call 636/394-9504 for info.

October 18-21: There's still time to sign up for our California Experience—tours to artisan food and wine producers, a winery dinner, hands-on cooking classes, and much more. Call 800/367-5348 or visit www.hmstravel.com/fcce.

Plus: If you're in the Southwest, tune in to Jennifer Bushman's "Nothing to It" television program to see demonstrations of recipes from the pages of *Fine Cooking*. The show airs on selected NBC and Fox stations in Nevada, Arizona, Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. Check local listings.

Editors' reply: We've had a few letters like yours, and according to Paul Bosland, professor of horticulture at New Mexico State University and author The Pepper Garden and Peppers of the World, we're all right. Bosland agrees that many people expect a pasilla to be brownish black, 6 to 8 inches long, and 3/4 inch wide, and they're correct. But the green chile pictured on p. 13 (all chiles start out green, by the way) is also a pasilla (not a poblano nor a chilaca), and was identified correctly as a cultivar of pasilla called pasilla salvatierra. "It's like Volkswagens," Bosland told us. "The Beetle is the most famous example, but there are other models, too." For more on chiles, visit chilepepperinstitute.org, a rich source of information.

If you want to eat it, you have to pronounce it right

I feel like a curmudgeon writing a criticism of your excellent magazine. FC #45 is up to your usual standards. Your readers would find themselves unfed, however, if they ordered quahogs as "KWAHhahgs." The correct pronunciation, at least along the New England coast is: CO, as in coal, HOG, as in the farm animal from which we get bacon and ham.

—Hart Peterson, Scituate, MA

Fine Cooking is more than just recipes

I agree with the comment in your Letters column in FC #45 by Ila Griffith Forster on how much she appreciated the Cooking Without Recipes feature in FC #43 ("Simple Sautés Make Quick & Flavorful Dinners," p. 38). That feature was what attracted me to your new (to me) magazine. I'm not interested in just another compendium of recipes. The simple sautés article made your magazine unique.

—Bob Burrell, Kill Devil Hills, NC

Editors' reply: We're glad you like Cooking Without Recipes, which we'll include every few issues (or more often, if you readers tell us to). We're also introducing two more new feature types: Market Basket Challenge, which you'll find on p. 58 in this issue, in which two chefs cook up the same list of ingredients to surprisingly



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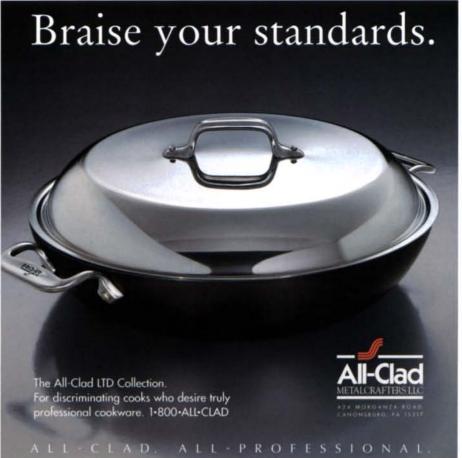
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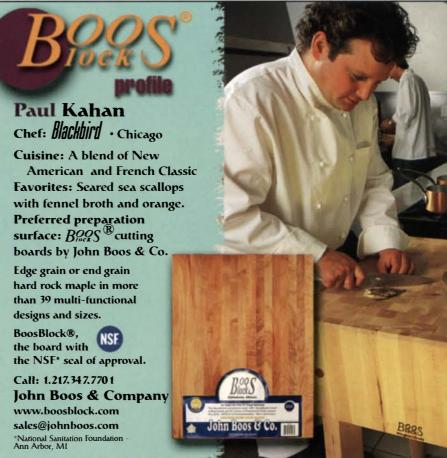
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different results, and Three Ways With..., which will debut in Fine Cooking #47. For that feature, we asked three chefs—Tom Douglas, Daniel Boulud, and Stephen Pyles—who have very different cooking styles to show us their signature technique for preparing roast chicken. It promises to be fun, eyeopening, and delicious!

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Getting the most from Fine Cooking's recipes

When you cook from a Fine Cooking recipe, we want you to get as good a result as we did in our test kitchen, so we recommend that you follow the quidelines below in addition to the recipe instructions.

Before you start to cook, read the recipe completely. Gather the ingredients and prepare them as directed in the recipe list before proceeding to the method. Give your oven plenty of time to heat up; use an oven thermometer to check.

Always start checking for doneness a few min-

utes before the time given in the recipe; use an instant-read thermometer.

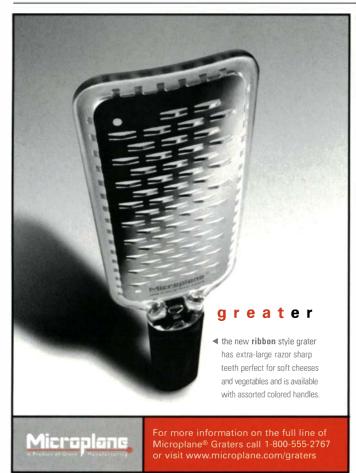
In baking recipes especially, the amounts of some ingredients (flour, butter, nuts, etc.) are listed by weight (pounds, ounces) and by volume (cups, tablespoons). Professional bakers measure by weight for consistent results, but we list volume measures too because not many home cooks have scales (although we highly recommend themsee Fine Cooking #13, p. 68, and #17, p. 62).

To measure flour by volume, stir the flour

and then lightly spoon it into a dry measure and level it with a knife; don't shake or tap the cup. Measure liquids in glass or plastic liquid measuring cups.

Unless otherwise noted, assume that

- Butter is unsalted.
- ♦ Eggs are large (about
- 2 ounces each).
- ◆ Flour is all-purpose (don't sift unless directed
- Sugar is granulated.
- Garlic, onions, and fresh ginger are peeled.
- Fresh herbs, greens, and lettuces are washed and dried.





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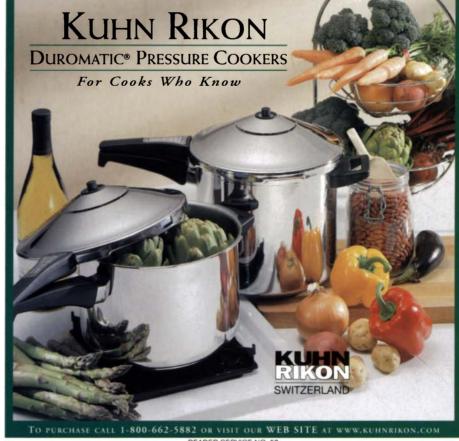
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Eat fresh corn as soon as you can

Farmstands groaning with freshly picked corn are a welcome but fleeting summer sight. So when the season's on, grab plump ears whose husks are fresh and green, not dried out. Kernels should be plump, never shriveled; you can often feel that plumpness through the husk. Try to buy corn locally, ask when it was picked (ideally, that morning), and eat it as soon as possible. If you must delay, refrigerate it no longer than a day or two in its husk in a plastic bag to help retain moisture and flavor.

"Yellow corn is said to have fuller flavor than white corn, but I think Silver Queen, a traditional white variety, is one of the best," says Alan Tangren, at Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, California. He also says that some of the new supersweet hybrids don't taste as rich as older varieties. The upside to the new hybrids, though, is that they still taste sweet a day or two after being picked and shipped to markets.

Slice fresh corn off the cob and toss it raw into tomato salads or salsas, bean salads with garlicky vinaigrettes, or soft polenta. Boil husked ears in unsalted water for a scant minute. Or grill corn in its husk over a hot fire until the outer husks have completely charred; shuck and slather with butter, plain or mixed with some lime juice and chile powder.



Seek out big blueberries

When shopping for cultivated blueberries, "here's a rare case where bigger is better," says Abby Dodge, a *Fine Cooking* contributing editor and the author of *Great Fruit Desserts*. Look for the fattest berries

you can find; they should be greyish purple and covered with a silvery bloom. (Wild blueberries—much harder to find outside of the Northeast—should be tiny and almost black.) Don't bother sniffing: Unlike many other fruits, ripe blueberries won't be very fragrant.



Lemon, sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg are good at coaxing out

blueberry flavor, but go easy on the spices so as not to overpower the berry flavor. Blueberries are rich in pectin; with a bit of gentle cooking, they'll thicken into a delicious compote to drizzle over shortcakes or meringue shells, says Abby.

Blueberries are sturdier than other berries and thus freeze quite well. For how to freeze blueberries and other berries, see Basics, p. 80.

Choose petite pattypans

Yellow pattypans, the summer squash pictured below, slice up into charming shapes because of their scalloped edges. Select pattypans no bigger than 3 inches. (Like other summer squash,

smaller ones are tastier and

more tender, while larger examples are usually bland and waterlogged.)

Try sliced pattypans steamed and
drizzled with a fruity,
peppery olive oil, seasoned with salt and pepper, or tossed into a stir-fry.
When sauteing any summer

squash, use very high heat due to its high water content, it will steam over lower heat.

Many gardeners have a mother lode of summer squash right about now. So after you've steamed and sautéed all the summer squash you can handle, add some to a summer stew along with herbs, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, and wax beans or make a big batch of summer squash soup to eat now and freeze for later. Flavor it with fragrant curry powder and a tart Granny Smith apple, and serve it hot or cold, topped with a dab of sour cream.

hotos: pattypans, Scott Phillips; all others, Amy Albert.

A ripe apricot is a deep, uniform gold

Ripeness cues can vary slightly between varieties, but you'll know a ripe, juicy apricot by its fruity fragrance and deep, uniform golden color, especially right around the stem, the portion that's the last to ripen. "Don't be taken in by that seductive blush: it's just the side of the fruit that faced the sun while hanging on the tree," says Al Courchesne, owner of Frog Hollow Farm in California. A ripe, juicy apricot will be firm, with a slight give when pressed. "Really ripe fruit with a lot of sugar will even wrinkle a bit," adds Becky Smith, Al's partner at Frog Hollow Farm. Blenheims,

the apricots pictured at right, can freckle as they get ripe. The freckling is purely cosmetic and doesn't make a difference in flavor or texture.

An apricot's sweet, rich flavor doesn't need much to show it off. Try sugar and a little lemon juice; add a pinch of cinnamon or nutmeg, if you like. Mix sliced apricots with other stone fruits to bake in a juicy crisp or a rustic tart; sprinkle toasted almonds onto the crisp topping or stir ground almonds into the tart crust. Cook fresh apricots into the simple jam at right, to smear on your morning toast or spoon over vanilla ice cream.

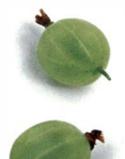


Becky Smith's Quick Apricot Jam

Here's a quick, simple jam that doesn't require canning and keeps for weeks in the fridge—if you don't eat it all up before then. For a sweeter spread, use a bit more sugar. This recipe is easily halved. *Yields 3 cups*.

2 lb. ripe apricots, rinsed, quartered, pitted, and unpeeled (about 16)
1 cup plus 3 Tbs. sugar
½ tsp. fresh lemon juice

In a wide, shallow pan, stir together the apricots and the sugar. Set the pan over medium-high heat and bring to a simmer, stirring often so the preserves don't stick or burn. Simmer the jam until it's thick but some chunks of fruit remain, 10 to 15 min. Stir in the lemon juice and remove the pan from the heat. Let cool, transfer to a plastic container with a tight-fitting lid, and refrigerate.





Tangy gooseberries

Gooseberries are familiar to English cooks, but they've only recently started appearing in U.S. markets (they'd long been banned here as they can be host to a mildew that attacks pine trees, but the ban has been lifted). Green, red, pink, yellow, and even milky-white varieties range from pea- to marble-size. Berries can be smooth or hairy; be sure to check hairy varieties for powdery mildew. A ripe gooseberry is assertively tart with a clean, bright flavor that may remind you of green grapes, Granny Smith apples, or even guava. Ripe berries should be firm, but if they're hard and resilient, they're underripe.

Before cooking, remove the stem and tail. Then try them in both sweet and savory dishes. Greg Higgins, chef-owner of Higgins restaurant in Portland, Oregon, adds whole berries to butter sauces for rich, oily fish like tuna or mackerel. In desserts, "gooseberries need a good dose of sugar to temper that remarkable acidity," he advises, and suggests an oatmeal-crusted gooseberry crisp, a gooseberry pie (add some tapioca to thicken), or a gooseberry fool (simmer a chunky gooseberry purée, chill, and fold into whipped cream).

Amy Albert is a senior editor for Fine Cooking

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001 15



Have a question of general interest about cooking? Send it to Q&A, Fine Cooking, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506, or by e-mail to fc@taunton.com, and we'll find a cooking professional with the answer.

A butter-oil blend makes a better sautéing fat

Is it true that you can increase the smoke point of butter by mixing it with oil, thereby creating a better fat for sautéing? The butter is still there, so how does the oil keep the butter from burning as it normally does?

> —Charlotte Umanoff, Roxbury, CT

Barry Swanson replies: The

temperatures at which fats and oils smoke and eventually burn are determined by chemical composition and are different for each

type of fat or oil. Saturated fatty acids tend to be more volatile than unsaturated fatty acids, meaning that they smoke and burn at

lower temperatures. Whole butter therefore has lower smoke and fire points than many vegetable oils, due to the higher concentration of saturated fatty acids in butter than in vegetable oil.

The addition of predominantly unsaturated vegetable oils to melted butter dilutes the concentration of saturated fatty acids in the sauté pan and effectively increases the smoke and fire points of the butter–oil mix, allowing you to have the flavor of whole butter in your sautéed foods without burning.

Barry Swanson, Ph.D., is a professor in the Department of Food Science & Human Nutrition at Washington State University.

Synthetic vs. natural corks

I've been noticing a lot of synthetic corks in the wines I buy.

Are they better than natural corks at preventing spoilage, or is there another reason they're becoming more common?

—Alice Weinstock,

Jack Gilbert replies: The purpose of bottle closures. whether synthetic or the more traditional wood cork, is to keep the wine in the bottle and the oxygen out. Wood cork has historically been the sealer of choice, but in the 1980s and early '90s, the demand for wood cork grew exponentially in response to increasing wine production. Though the subject of debate, some suggest that as demand for wood cork rose, manufacturers may have cut corners on quality control, namely the cleaning and sterilizing of cork to eliminate molds. The presence of these molds, combined with residual chlorine in the corks, produces the chemical compound known as TCA (short for 2.4.6 trichloroanisole). TCA causes cork taint, which reveals itself as a musty, mildew-like smell that ruins wine.

Synthetic closures emerged as a viable alternative to wood corks because they aren't susceptible to TCA (although TCA can still occur in a wine bottle due to factors unrelated to the type of closure).

Advocates of wood corks suggest that synthetic corks may lack enough elasticity over time to provide a reliable closure for long-term aging. Only time will tell on this issue. Advocates of synthetic closures point out the problems of cork dust and crumbs in wine (due to compression of the wood cork during bot-

tling, cork extraction, and dry corks) and of course, TCA.

For many wine drinkers. pulling a wood cork from the bottle is crucial to the overall wine experience. But more and more winemakers are finding that synthetic cork's promise of better quality outweighs the aesthetic appeal of wood cork. In spite of the wood cork industry's ongoing efforts to minimize TCA and introduce quality control processes to improve their product, it's likely that we'll be seeing more synthetic closures in the marketplace. Jack Gilbert is the proprietor of Rutherford Oaks Winery in St. Helena, California; he also

works with the Vineyard Edu-

cation Department of Benziger

Family Winery in Glen Ellen,

Why is that chicken so vellow?

California.

Why are some brands of chicken very yellow while others are more pink?

—Jill Seldon, via e-mail

Todd Applegate replies: The color of chicken skin is a matter of what the birds are fed. The compound that causes the color differences belongs to a family known as the carotenoids (the same family to which vitamin A belongs). The colors in goldfish, shrimp, canaries, and flamingos are also due to carotenoids.

Even though skin color isn't typically a good index of quality, consumer preferences for skin color vary considerably within the United States and throughout the world, and poultry growers are aware of this. Growers feed their birds a diet designed to pro-

duce a certain skin color depending upon where the birds will be marketed. Typically, diets containing appreciable amounts of corn produce greater amounts of carotenoids than diets containing wheat. Synthetic carotenoids and concentrated carotenoids derived from marigold petals are also used in poultry diets.

Todd Applegate, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and poultry extension specialist with the Department of Animal Sciences at Purdue University.

Freezing cheesecakes

Can cheesecakes be frozen with good results?

> —Saniya Bloomer. via e-mail

Elinor Klivans replies: A cheesecake with a high fat content from cream cheese or mascarpone and a dense texture will freeze very well. The fat in the cream cheese helps keep the ice crystals that form during freezing separated and small, which prevents undesirable icy pockets from forming. As a guideline, a 9-inch cheesecake made with at least 1½ pounds of cream cheese contains enough fat to freeze well.

It's important to cool cheesecakes thoroughly before wrapping and freezing them. Otherwise, moisture (which turns into that undesirable ice) may condense inside the wrapping. After removing a thoroughly cooled

cheesecake from its pan and sliding it onto a serving plate or a cardboard circle, wrap it tightly in plastic and then again in Cheesecakes wrapped in this manner can be frozen for up to

Defrost the cheesecake in the refrigerator for at least six hours, but preferably overnight to ensure that it thaws completely. Leave the wrapping on during the defrosting so any moisture collects on the wrapper, not on your cheesecake. To bring out the best flavor, let the cheesecake sit at room temperature for one hour before serving. If rewrapped care-

Elinor Klivans is the author of Bake & Freeze Desserts. Her latest book, Fearless Baking, is due out in September. •

heavy-duty aluminum foil. one month.

> fully, any leftover cheesecake can be stored in the refrigerator for up to five days.

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Find a wonderful food partner in crisp Sauvignon Blanc



Sauvignon Blanc likes cool climates and chalky soil

often surpasses its more glam-

orous cousin in its versatility

with food, its delicious fla-

vors, and its affordability.

Sauvignon Blanc, also called simply Sauvignon, does well in a variety of climates but thrives in those that are cool to temperate. While the vine isn't exactly picky about which soil type to call home, it loves those based on chalk and limestone.

Sauvignon Blanc is also a winemaker's dream. Once crushed and fermented (usually in stainless steel, as opposed to oak), it's ready in weeks, as opposed to Chardonnay, which needs months of oak barrel aging, stirring, and fussing over.

citrusy, and herbal

In a lineup of the usual white wine suspects, it's easy to spot almost any Sauvignon Blanc by its standout grapefruitcitrus and fresh green-herbgrassy aromas and flavor—all framed by vibrant, sometimes bracing, acidity. The same "green" elements, though, can become pungent and unwieldy if the fruit hasn't completely ripened (this happens in cool years). Those bright citrus notes can become rasping, stemmy, and unpleasantly vegetal.

To tame Sauvignon Blanc's "veggie factor," winemakers have long used two different techniques. They'll often blend it with Sémillon, a rounded and nutty-tasting grape. In addition, Sauvignon-again, which is usually fermented and aged in

Great matches for Sauvignon Blanc

Sauvignon Blanc is one of the most foodversatile white wines around, with lively acidity and mouthwatering fruit that make it a welcome partner for a wide range of foods.

Try it with:

- Smoked trout or sturgeon on toast with crème fraîche and fresh dill.
- Sole meunière.
- ◆ Fillet of salmon with a chive or dill butter sauce.
- Composed salads of ruby grapefruit slices, toasted walnuts, goat cheese, and a lemony dressing.
- Grilled chicken breast with mango-cilantro chutney (especially good with oaked Sauvignon Blanc).

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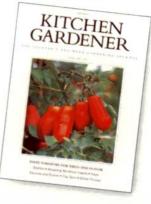
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stainless steel—can be fermented and aged in wood for a short time to give it roundness and more depth of flavor. While contact with wood does tend to mute some of that delightfully zesty fruit, it can add complexity to the finished wine, too, as long as the winemaker doesn't overdo it. Sauvignon Blanc doesn't take to prolonged oak aging as well as Chardonnay does.

From France, benchmark Sauvignon Blancs

I think some of the purest examples of Sauvignon Blanc come from the Loire Valley communes of Pouilly-Fumé and Sancerre. Here the cool growing conditions and limestone-laden soils combine to create wines of unmatched citrusy, minerally character and vibrancy. For examples of Sauvignons possessing a stamp of identity and tasting of their origins, the wines of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé are unequaled by any other Sauvignon Blancs in the world.

Great white Bordeaux are the world's finest oaked Sauvignon Blancs. Low yields in the vineyard, blending with Sémillon (often 50% or more), and oak barrel aging result in age-worthy wines that leave a lasting impression. You'll find two styles. At one end are the great estates that make rich (and costly) wines like Château Haut-Brion Blanc and Pavillon Blanc de Château Margaux. These are more challenging to match with food—they're intensely flavored and need something just as intense right alongside, like veal with a mushroom cream sauce. At the other end are the bright, uncomplicated. and more affordable Sauvignon Blancs such as Château Bonnet and Château Launay, which are perfect for

Sauvignon Blanc picks

Here are ten Sauvignon Blancs worth trying. Retail prices are approximate.

FRANCE:

1999 Pascal Jolivet Sancerre, \$181999 Blanchet Pouilly-Fumé Cuvée Silex, \$181998 Domaine de Chevalier, Graves Blanc, \$50

CHILE:

2000 Casa Lapostolle, Rapel Valley, \$82000 Veramonte, Casablanca Valley, \$10

NEW ZEALAND:

2000 Seresin Estate, Marlborough, \$112000 Villa Maria Sauvignon, \$101999 Allan Scott Sauvignon, \$16

CALIFORNIA:

1999 Handley Cellars Sauvignon Blanc, \$15 1998 Dry Creek Fumé Blanc Reserve, \$16

everyday enjoyment and a great match for shellfish.

But Sauvignon Blanc doesn't begin and end in France (as the French would have us believe.)

Delicious Sauvignon from the southern hemisphere

Sauvignon Blanc has undergone a revolution in New Zealand during the last two decades. Wineries such as Cloudy Bay, Montana, and Allan Scott make delicious Sauvignon Blancs with full grapefruit and gooseberry flavors and snappy acidity. A bottle from the most recent vintage can often be jolting to the uninitiated palate, but it's this sassy fruit buoyed by very high acidity that makes New

Zealand Sauvignons such fantastic food partners. They're the best possible contrast to fresh shellfish, tomato bruschetta, and a salad topped with warm goat cheese—all for less than an average California Chardonnay.

Chile is another recent convert to Sauvignon Blanc. While Chilean winemakers haven't had the luxury of much time to work with Sauvignon, their learning curve has been impressively steep. Boththe Rapel Valley and the Casablanca Valley are Chilean regions to watch.

California Sauvignons vary in style

Sauvignon is grown in every major wine region in Califor-

nia, and the wines range from bright and sassy to richer and oakier. They've been accused of an identity crisis because of not following one style or another, but the advantage is a wide array of delicious styles from which to choose.

Fumé Blanc is a California invention; it's a marketing name for Sauvignon Blanc that has been wood-aged and is dry. Fumé Blanc is sometimes, though not always, blended with Sémillon. Robert Mondavi coined the term in the 1970s. He wanted to market his Sauvignon Blanc more distinctively, and the name has since stuck.

Tim Gaiser is a master sommelier and a wine consultant. ◆

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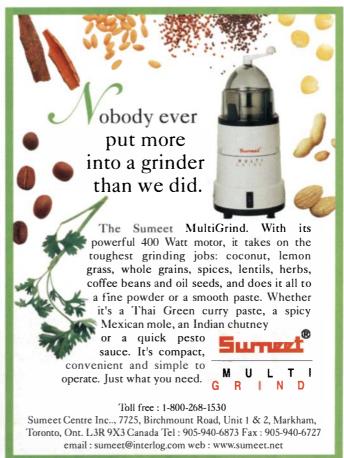
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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001 21

CUISINES

BY JIM PEYTON



Mesquite-grilled chuck steak (agujas) has an almost buttery texture and an intoxicating smoky flavor; it makes a casual meal with salsa and pico de gallo.



The cooking of northern Mexico evolved as a fusion between the culinary traditions of the native peoples and the Spaniards, combined with the region's natural resources.

Barbecuing northern Mexico style

wood, invariably mesquite—is the heart and soul of northern Mexican cooking. I learned to cook *al carbón* years ago on a trip to Múzquiz in the Mexican state of Coahuila, where a friend took me to a gathering of the Pirañas (piranhas), an unofficial men's club so named because of the members' affinity for meat. The men gather to spend an afternoon catching up on the week's events, to cook, and to drink beer (but not necessarily in that order). On a long barbecue constructed of

cinder blocks, I saw large, thin slices of chuck steak cooking over what seemed to be inadequate coals. About every ten minutes, one of the men would wander over and turn the meat. After thirty minutes or so, a piece of meat was removed, chopped with a cleaver, and served with hot flour tortillas, pico de gallo, and a wonderful salsa. The meat was tender and had a smoky, almost buttery taste. Even though I often prefer steak medium rare, I was soon addicted to the flavor and consistency of this well-done meat.

Key ingredients

Being predominantly arid, hot in summer and often quite cold in winter, northern Mexico can't support the wide variety of plant life found in the temperate, central plateau and steamy jungles of southern Mexico. Still, the north has significant resources. The ingredients below merge to create the basic elements of much of northern Mexican cooking.

Flour tortillas

There's a good reason why, to this day, you'll find flour tortillas in northern Mexico as often as corn tortillas, but you'll rarely encounter them farther south. When the Spanish came to Mexico, they brought wheat. Soon they found that wheat, combined with another Spanish ingredient, lard, made a terrific version of the native flatbread. the tortilla. Flour tortillas had advantages over those made of corn, since corn was difficult to grow in the north and dough made from it spoiled quickly.

Some U.S. supermarkets carry decent flour tortillas, but those sold in Mexican or Latin American markets are likely to

be fresher and better. You can also order terrific fresh flour tortillas from Maria & Ricardo's Tortilla Factory in, of all places, Boston (see Resources, p. 24).

Beef

The Spanish brought cattle, sheep, and goats to Mexico, and they thrived in the north. With the vast majority of northern land devoted to range animals-mostly cattle-beef became an integral part of the cuisine. Cuts from the flavorful chuck are perfect for the slow grilling of northern Mexico. For this technique and recipe featured here, you'll need the thinnest chuck steaks you can find (no thicker than 3/4 inch), well marbled and preferably cut from the eye of chuck. I often pound my steaks to about ½ inch thick. Bone-in steaks are the most authentic, but boneless steaks also work well.

Mesquite

In times of drought, the Spanish fed mesquite tree seed pods to their cattle, and the result was that mesquite seeds were dropped into the soil in a nearperfect growing medium. Soon mesquite, an ideal grilling wood, was everywhere. Today in the north, you can't go far without smelling the enticing aroma of meat cooking over mesquite.

Mesquite wood chunks and hardwood charcoal are available in many parts of the U.S. (see Resources, p. 24). And while cooking al carbón isn't traditional over a gas grill, you can simulate smoking hardwood by using mesquite wood chips with your gas fire. (Charcoal grillers will also want to have some mesquite chips on hand.) Oak, hickory, or other hardwood charcoal or chips will serve if you can't find mesquite.

Fruits and vegetables

Northern Mexico is blessed with rivers that provide sufficiently rich soil and irrigation to produce a modest number of crops (compared to the south), including tomatoes, chiles, and onions, which are used to make a wide variety of salsas and relishes. Avocados grow in the north, too, and are frequently either served in slices or used to make guacamole. (Continued)

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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001 23

The technique

An important difference between the way Americans and Mexicans grill is that Mexicans usually cook meat over much lower heat for a longer time. The technique has a few advantages: Cheaper, more flavorful cuts of meat can be used; less fuel is needed; precise timing isn't necessary; and it doesn't interfere with socializing.

To prepare a wood or charcoal fire, ignite about 5 quarts of mesquite or other hardwood chunks or charcoal using an electric or chimney starter. Avoid using lighter fluid, as it gives off an unpleasant odor.

When the fire is well established, bank the coals to one side of the grill and grill the tomatoes and chiles for the



Give yourself plenty of room to grill by banking the coals as far to the side as possible.

salsa directly over the coals while they're still very hot. Then let the coals burn down until they're covered with gray ash and no flames are visible (this will take 30 to 40 minutes from



Turn the meat after 15 minutes. No peeking before or you'll release the smoke.

the time you bank the coals). An oven thermometer set on the grill grate opposite the coals should read 250° to 275°F after the grill lid has been on for a few minutes. If

you're using charcoal, toss over the coals a handful of mesquite chips that have been soaked in water for about an hour (mesquite wood chunks put out enough smoke on their own). As soon as the chips begin to smoke, put the meat on the grate opposite from and as far from the coals as possible and cover the grill.

If you're using a gas grill, follow the manufacturer's instructions for setting it up for indirect grilling and smoking.

Cooking time depends on the heat of the coals, the distance of the meat from the fire, air circulation, and the shape of the grill. As a starting point, a ¾-inch-thick boneless chuck steak will take 30 to 40 minutes, but let experience and instinct be your guide.



Agujas

Agujas (pronounced ah-GOO-haas) are thin, very flavorful chuck steaks. The secret of this dish is that when high-fat meat cooks over a low fire, it will be charred and impregnated with smoke but won't dry out. Rice and beans are traditional accompaniments. Serves four.

1½ lb. boneless chuck eye steak or 2 lb. bone-in chuck eye steak, cut no more than ¾ inch thick

Juice of 1 or 2 limes

Pico de gallo (see the recipe at right)

1 ripe avocado or 1 cup guacamole

Salsa de serrano o jalapeño asado (see the recipe below)

8 to 12 flour tortillas, heated

Prepare a charcoal or gas grill as described in the text above. Brush the steaks lightly with the lime juice and season with salt. Grill as described above, turning once after 15 min., until they're charred and well done yet tender, about 30 min.

While the steaks are grilling, prepare the pico de gallo. Just before the meat is done, slice the avocado, if using. Remove the meat from the grill and chop or slice it very thinly. Serve with the pico de gallo, the avocado or guacamole, the salsa, and the warm tortillas.

Salsa de Serrano o Jalapeño Asado (Grilled chile sauce)

With the robust flavor of charred tomatoes and chiles, this simple salsa is one of the best allpurpose table sauces. If you like hot sauce, use 3 serranos or 2 jalapeños; for a mediumhot sauce, use 2 serranos or 1 jalapeño. *Yields about 1 cup.*

2 medium to large ripe tomatoes 2 to 3 serrano chiles or 1 to 2 jalapeños Salt to taste

Grill the tomatoes and chiles over hot coals, turning occasionally, until they're soft and the skins are well charred, 5 to 10 min. Pull off and discard the chile stems. Purée the tomatoes and chiles in a blender for about 30 seconds, strain into a serving bowl, and season to taste with salt. The sauce will be smooth and fairly loose; it will be flecked with bits of charred tomato and chile skin.

Pico de Gallo

In northern Mexico, pico de gallo (pronounced PEE-koh day GUY-yoh and literally translated as "rooster's beak") is the universal table relish. Yields about 2 cups.

- 1 medium-size ripe tomato, cored, seeded, and finely chopped
- 3 serrano chiles or 2 jalapeños, cored, seeded and minced
- 2 scallions (white and green parts), minced 3 Tbs. finely chopped white onion ¼ cup lightly packed chopped fresh cilantro 1 tsp. fresh lime juice, or to taste Salt to taste

Toss all the ingredients together until well mixed. Serve immediately, as this relish does not keep.

Resources

Maria & Ricardo's tortillas can be ordered from the Harbar Corporation at 800/881-7040. A package of ten 6-inch flour tortillas is \$1.80 plus shipping. Whole-wheat, corn, and flavored tortillas are also available. They store well in the freezer for up to two months.

B&B Charcoal in
Texas (877/725-8815)
sells mesquite wood
chunks, charcoal, and
chips. Ten pounds of charcoal cost \$4.10; five
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Jim Peyton is the author of El Norte: The Cuisine of Northern Mexico. ◆

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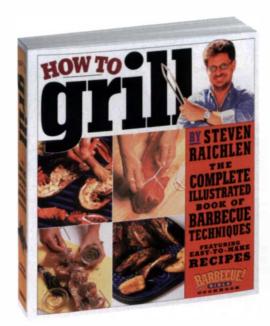


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Get grilling

This summer, there will be only one new addition to my cookbook shelves: Steven Raichlen's 480-page *How to Grill* (\$19.95 paperback; \$29.95 hardcover). With techniques and recipes for 100 of the most popular grilled foods—and 1,000 photographs illustrating these techniques—I can keep myself busy in the back yard well past sunset every night.

What I really love about the format of this book is that every chapter is divided into single technique concepts, complete with step-by-step prep and grilling photos, plus a recipe to get you started. I want to try everything: grill a prime rib, rotisseriegrill a whole chicken, grill chicken on a beer can, grill fish steaks, grill a whole eggplant. And the recipes that go with the techniques sound pretty tasty, too: Basil-Grilled Tuna with Arugula Salad; Sesame Five-Spice Rotisserie Chicken; Grilled Quesadillas.

A bonus opening section on getting started offers detailed step-by-step instructions and photos for building and managing charcoal and gas fires. This is useful stuff for beginners and old-hat grillers alike.

—Susie Middleton, executive editor

Ultrafine Baker's Sugar dissolves like a dream

As a diehard baker always on the lookout for new baking products, I was eager to test C&H's ultrafine pure cane sugar for bakers. A little skeptical of the claim that its



Baker's Sugar measures just like regular granulated, I compared the weights of one cup of each sugar several times and the results were always the same: both equal 7½ ounces. To test the claim that the Baker's Sugar blends more quickly and smoothly than regular sugar, I selected a few favorite recipes for retesting. From the results of my angel food cake and cocoa meringues, I'd say that the sugar works superbly in desserts made with whipped egg whites. The egg whites and sugar came together very smoothly and baked to a delicate, fine texture. I got less dramatic though still successful results from batches of chocolate sauce and brownies. The ultrafine sugar blended quickly and smoothly, though the results were quite similar to those I get when using regular sugar.

C&H Baker's Sugar is available in grocery and gourmet stores in the West and Midwest. You can also order it online from www.bakerssugar.com or by calling 925/688-1731. A 4.4-pound bag costs about \$3.50.

—Abigail Johnson Dodge, test kitchen director

New Microplane grater perfect for Parmesan

First they turned a wood-worker's rasp into a grater that's unparalleled for citrus zest. Now the folks at Microplane have turned a dry-wall tool into a grater that works beautifully on hard cheeses. Dubbed the "ribbon grater," it has razor-sharp, bridge-like teeth that make the lightest shavings of Parmesan I've ever seen.

This is the coarsest Microplane grateryet, and after shredding a variety of foods with it, I've found that it works best with hard foods like very firm cheeses and carrots (the grating holes are relatively narrow and tend to turn softer foods like potatoes and Monterey Jack cheese into goo). It also works well on chocolate, though the result is more granular than the shavings you might expect after seeing what it does to Parmesan. Another plus: You can grate in both directions (the original Microplanes let you grate only in one direction). The ribbon grater sells for about \$18 at major kitchen-supply stores. You can also order directly from the manufacturer by calling 800/555-2767.

> —Jennifer Armentrout, assistant editor



Buttery French olive oil is just right for summer

Returning from southern France last summer, I spied rows of beautiful blue cans of olive oil at the Nice airport. They looked like the essence of Provence and I longed to buy one, but I'd just spent my last few francs on a bottle of wine. When I found out that those blue cans are being imported to the United States, I couldn't wait to try one. It turns out that what's inside a can of Nicolas Alziari Huile d'Olive Vierge Extra is as enchanting as the container itself. Buttery is the best word I can use to describe this smooth,

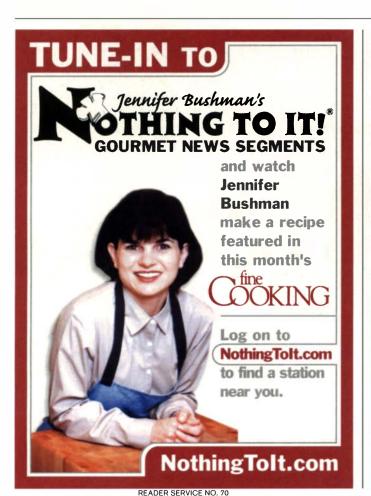
mellow oil. I used it, with just a touch of milk, to make the best mashed potatoes I've ever had. Its light herbal quality makes it a natural for summertime, and it's the perfect partner for typically Niçoise ingredients like those in the Tuna Confit & White Bean Salad on p. 69. To order, call Zingerman's at 888/636-8162 or visit www.zingermans.com. A 1-liter tin is \$32. —S. M.

Pigtail flips food fast

Presenting the pigtail food flipper: a barbecue tool with a silly name and a seriously functional form. This long wood-handled stainless-steel shaft ends in a curved, needle-sharp point that hooks into foods effortlessly (I didn't believe this until I tried it). A flip of the wrist and the food is flipped. It's quicker and more fun than tongs or a spatula, and it'll work for most meats, poultry, and vegetables (but don't try it on fish or big hamburgers). The point is so fine that you don't have to worry about meat juices bleeding out when you pierce a steak.

It's also handy when food sticks to the grill grate. Instead of tearing up the food as you try to wedge a spatula underneath, you can gently loosen it by sliding the pigtail hook under the food along each bar of the grill grate.

A set of two pigtails (one about 12 inches long, the other 19) costs \$25. Order online at www.pigtailff.com or call 518/398-6617. -- J. A.



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Taste your way to the perfect fruit sorbet

Refreshing, smooth, a blast of pure and distinct flavor—these are just a few ways to describe the perfect sorbet. Because of specific freezing properties, making your own fruit sorbet can be a bit intimidating, but by following your taste buds and a few very basic rules, you can easily create your own delicious sorbets.

A flavorful base means a great-tasting sorbet

The first and most important part of making a sorbet is to capture the distinct and fresh flavor of your main ingredient in a base that you can freeze. The base must be a liquid or a smooth purée. Happily, many sorbet ingredients, like citrus juices and other fruit juices, are already liquid and ready

to go, but most fruits need to be puréed and strained to get a smooth consistency. In order to develop ultimate flavor and in some cases to destroy the enzymes that cause fruits to oxidize (turn brown), you may need to cook the fruit a bit before you purée it.

Fruits that oxidize, like bananas, apples, and stone fruits, should always be cooked to keep the base from browning. Citrus juices, melons, and tropical fruits such as mango and papaya should never be cooked because heat kills their flavor. For berries, cooking is optional; for instance, perfectly ripe strawberries can be puréed and used as is, or they can be warmed with a little sugar to pull out more of the juices. If the berries aren't per-

fectly ripe, heat
will enhance their
flavor. If you're ever
in doubt, cook a small
amount and compare the
cookedversion to the raw fruit.

As the fruit cooks, taste it often. If the fruit seems extremely sour or tart, stir in small amounts of sugar, but treat the sugar as though you were adding salt to a soup: Addit gradually, one spoonful at a time. Freezing dulls flavors just a bit, but essentially your sorbet will taste just like the base. If you have a greattasting base, you're well on your way to a perfect sorbet.

Sugar content determines texture

The concentration of sugar in the base affects not only

flavor but also the texture of the finished sorbet. Too much sugar inhibits the base from freezing, while too little sugar results in a hard, icy sorbet.

Fortunately, there's a great low-tech tool for checking sugar density: an egg. When you place a fresh egg (still in the shell) in a sorbet base

Tips for making sorbet

- ◆ Always use fresh, clean, ripe fruits to make sorbet.
- Alcohol can be added to sorbet, but keep it to a minimum. If alcohol makes up more than 3% of the base, the sorbet won't freeze properly.
- ◆ If the base needs more sugar, make a simple syrup (by boiling together equal parts by volume of sugar and water until dissolved); let it cool before adding it to the base.
- ◆ If the sugar density seems perfect when using the egg test (see the photo at right) but the sorbet tastes overly sweet, lemon juice will cut the sweetness. Lemon also enhances many fruit flavors.
- ◆ If the base tastes perfectly sweet but the egg sinks, add light corn syrup. It tastes less sweet than sugar, so it will raise the egg without increasing the sweetness as much as sugar would. Corn syrup also promotes smoothness.

Most fruits need a little heat and sugar to taste their best in a sorbet



Barely cover the bottom of a pot with water, add your fruit, and sprinkle with a little sugar. Set the pot over low heat and cook, stirring occasionally, until the fruit is very flavorful (this should take no longer than 30 minutes). Taste frequently.



When you're happy with the flavor, purée the base in a food processor or a blender. Pass the purée through a fine sieve to remove any seeds or pulp. The base should be no thicker than heavy cream; add a little water to thin it if necessary. Chill well before freezing.

with the correct sugar density, the egg should float, and the exposed portion of the shell should be about the size of a dime. If any more or less of the shell is exposed, you'll know you need to adjust the base (see the photo at right).

Keep in mind that the egg is simply a guide and that taste is still the most important factor. If the egg doesn't exactly show the size of a dime but the flavor is to your liking, go ahead and freeze your sorbet.

Constant motion makes a smooth sorbet

The constant motion of an ice-cream maker keeps sorbet smooth during freezing. As the base comes into contact

with a frozen surface, a blade or dasher sweeps through to refine the ice crystals and create the smooth texture we like. There are many types of ice-cream makers, electric and manual. Most of them work well for sorbet, even the old-fashioned tin canister that sits inside a wooden barrel packed with salted ice can make a beautiful sorbet. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for using your particular machine.

For the smoothest texture, freeze the sorbet base the same day you plan to serve it. Without chemical preservatives, sorbet can become too firm if kept frozen for long periods. The great thing about sorbet, though, is

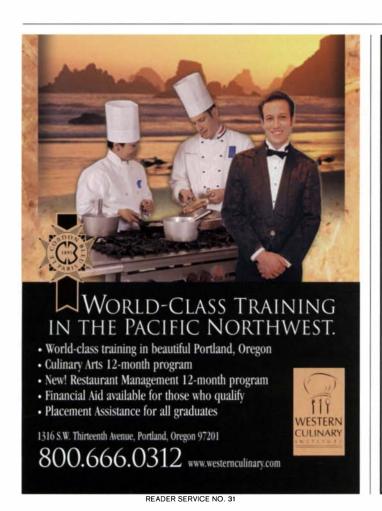
Use an egg to check sugar density

Wash and dry an egg in the shell and float it in your base. If the exposed shell is bigger than a dime, there's probably too much sugar in the base. Add a little water or more fruit purée to reduce the concentration of sugar. If the egg sinks or less than a dime's worth of shell shows, there isn't enough sugar in the base. Whisk in simple syrup (see Tips, opposite), sugar, or corn syrup and continue to check with the egg.

that you can thaw it, adjust the flavor, and refreeze it in an ice-cream machine as many times as you want until you get it the way you like it.



Dan Budd is an associate professor of baking and pastry arts at The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.



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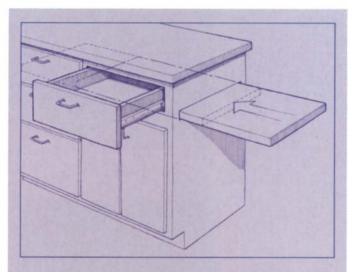
Does your kitchen have a feature that really works? Send a description and photo to Kitchen Detail, Fine Cooking, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506, or e-mail fc@taunton.com. We pay for submissions we publish.

Adding work space in a pinch

Whether you're rolling out pie crust, making pasta dough from scratch, cooking for a crowd, or sharing the kitchen with a friend, there's often a moment when you need one more work area than you've got. At times like that, slideout surfaces can be your salvation.

Under-the-counter cutting boards aren't a new idea, but the versions shown here take the concept a step further. These are truly useful counter extensions, acting as pinch-hitting surfaces for chopping, stirring, kneading, or rolling. Two tips to keep in mind: Choose a thick, solid material, and the right hardware and design to support it.





A counter below the counter

When Lesley Degner of Winnipeg, Manitoba, redesigned her kitchen, she asked her architect for at least one lower surface (she's 5 feet, 3 inches tall). He came up with a 30-inchhigh, extendable, solid surface board that slides into a standard 36-inch high peninsula just below the top drawers. Fully extended, the board provides

3 feet of extra counter space (several more feet remain inside the peninsula to allow the board to cantilever), which Lesley uses to make her own pasta or as a buffet area for parties. Even when pushed all the way in, the board still protrudes about 4 inches, "making it the perfect place to open wine bottles," Lesley says.

A marble pastry board glides in and out with ease

in Fran Gage's San Francisco
kitchen. A top drawer with
its sides cut down (as
shown in the cutaway) and
heavy-duty, full-extension
drawer slides support the marble.
"I use it for rolling out pastry dough,
tempering chocolate, and pouring out
hot syrups to make candy," says Fran,
a pastry chef and author.

A pull-out surface can become a floating island.

allowing you to work where

it's most convenient.
This example is
modeled after a base
pull-out cart made by
Wood-Mode Cabinetry
(see Sources, p. 84).
The pull-out could
also double as a cart
for shuttling food and
plates to the table.





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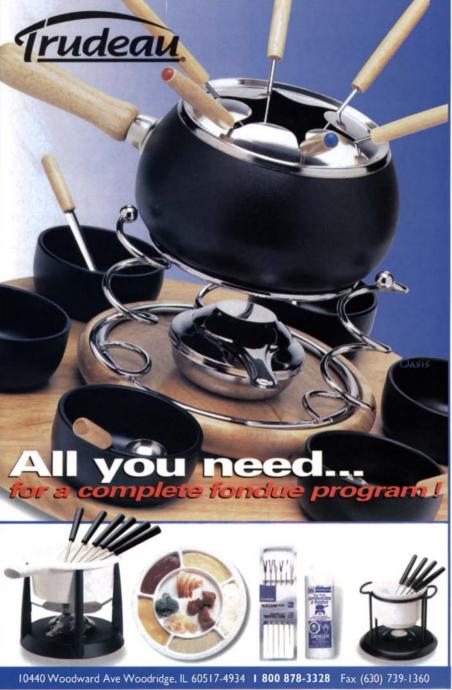
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Avoid tong fatigue

Spring-loaded kitchen tongs are among my favorite cooking tools. I use them for everything from turning pork chops, tossing vegetables in the sauté pan, plating and garnishing a main dish or dessert, and even serving salad. I learned early on to avoid a tired hand and forearm by "choking up" on the tongs so my hand is nearer to the blades. This gives me more control over the tong blades and creates less fatigue and stress on my hand.

—Lydia Nieves, Nogales, AZ

Peel broccoli stems for great flavor

I have learned from my mother to use up broccoli stems as well as the head. The insides of these thick, tough stems are actually quite sweet and tender and can be cooked any way you like. Just take a sharp paring knife and carefully peel the tough, fibrous skin length-

wise from the stems. Then slice or chop them according to your recipe.

—Nguyen Thi Kim Loan, Fajardo, Puerto Rico

Sheet protector + binder clip = recipe holder

Many of my recipes are on single pages printed off the Internet, which I keep in plastic sheet protectors. For handy reference while working at the stove, I attach a binder clip to the inside of the cupboard door closest to the range, where I can conveniently hang my recipe at eye level while cooking. This also saves a bit of precious counter space.

—Laura Minne, Boise, ID

Blot chicken dry with a tower of paper towels

While cutting up a whole chicken for frying, I find it convenient to dry the chicken pieces by placing some on a layer of paper towels, covering them with

another layer of paper towels, and then adding more chicken pieces, etc. My little chicken tower stays neat and dry until I'm ready to batter the pieces for the skillet. This technique is also good when cutting portions of any meat or fish.

—Ruth Moreland, Austin, TX

Rubber wineglass mats keep kitchen tools anchored

I bought some thin foam "Grip Liner" mats to line our wineglass shelves, but I'm just now discovering how versatile this material is. I can store my damp, just-washed glasses on the mats to dry, and I use pieces of the mat under cutting boards and mixing bowls to keep them from sliding on the counter. A piece of the mat makes a great lid-opener for the most stubborn jar. Used as a drawer liner, the mats keep my kitchen hand tools and cutlery organized, preventing them from sliding around in the drawers.

> —Sadie McAllister, Little Rock, AR

Nonstick aluminum foil

When I'm making something with a sticky, cheesy top, like lasagna, that needs to be covered in foil before baking, I like to spray the foil with cooking spray before placing it on top of the pan. This keeps the cheese from sticking to the foil and pulling off all that good topping.

—Julie Black, Dexter, MI

For lighter croutons, use egg whites

I use fluffy whipped egg whites instead of oil as a fatfree way to get seasonings to adhere to homemade croutons. These are just as good as the ones I used to make with olive oil, but a lot lighter. After drying the bread cubes in the oven, I mix them with the whipped egg whites, toss with the seasonings, and bake the croutons until dry. Three egg whites will coat croutons from about two large loaves of Italian bread.

> —Shannon R. Williams, Seattle, WA

Soaking and drying potatoes for french fries

Fine Cooking #44 had an excellent article on french fries. I soak my cut, raw french fries in water in my salad spinner; when I get ready to fry them, I empty the water and

spin dry the potatoes. It works like a charm.

> —Iim Conner, Hutchinson, MN

Quick and convenient flour-dusting

When a recipe calls for ½ cup flour for dusting pieces of fish or meat, the dusting really uses only 1 or 2 tablespoons of flour. To add convenience and avoid waste, I saved one of those square, jumbo-size, clear plastic spice jars with a shaker lid and put in 2 cups flour, 2 teaspoons salt, and 1 teaspoon ground black pepper. Whenever a recipe calls for dredging in seasoned flour, I just reach for my jar and shake some out.

-Madeline DeBlase, Stamford, CT •





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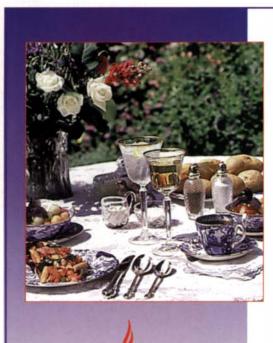
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A Casual Menu from Northeast Spain

Baked chicken with crisp, garlicky skin and lemon-sage flavor is the delicious centerpiece of this homey Catalan meal

BY BILL DEVIN



Catalan Mushrooms with Garlic & Parsley

ight years ago, I moved from California to Catalonia, a northeastern region of Spain nestled between the Pyrenees Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. I work for a Spanish food exporter, and my mission is to search for the area's best products, everything from cheese to chocolate. One of the best perks of my job is the time I get to spend with local farmers, food artisans, restaurant chefs, and home cooks, which has deepened my love for the region's cuisine.

Catalan home cooking is honest, upfront food. It can be subtle or bold, but it's rarely hot and spicy. I used to find this kind of food at restaurants, too, but lately chefs here have gotten rather fancy. They're still using the same local ingredients olive oil, garlic, parsley, nuts, roasted peppers, wine vinegar, fresh herbs, and sea salt, to name a few but many chefs are experimenting with ever more creative techniques and presentations. (If you've run across the foamy food trend or olive oil ice cream, you know what I mean; they were both born here.) Meanwhile, home cooks are sticking to their modest roots, turning out comforting food that tastes great, costs little, and doesn't involve needless toil. While the new stuff is fun to eat, I still prefer to cook the simple way, where the ingredients do most of the work for me.

A traditional meal starts with sautéed mushrooms and ends with fresh fruit

The following menu introduces you to a few classics, such as romesco sauce and sautéed spinach with pine nuts and raisins, plus a crisp-



Green Salad with Olives, Manchego & Romesco Sauce

skinned baked chicken with lemon and fresh herbs, one of my own homey creations that my family really loves. Here's the lineup.

For a delicious starter (called a *tapa* in Spain), sautéed mushrooms are tossed with garlic and parsley. My wife, Rosa Maria, introduced me to this dish and its strange preparation. The raw



Chicken Thighs Baked with Lemon, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme

mushrooms soak in water for 10 minutes, and this immersion helps clean them and also seems to help leach out even more water during cooking. The result is mushrooms with an unusually firm texture and intense flavor. They always remind me of escargot.

For the next course, a green salad gets dressed with a red pepper sauce, called romesco. The sauce

takes its name from its primary ingredient, a romesco chile, which is mildly hot and deeply flavored. In the United States, I use dried ancho chiles since romescos are hard to find here. I sear the chile on both sides in a hot pan for a hint of smokiness before reconstituting it in hot water.

Romesco sauce is amazingly versatile. I first tried it as a dip for grilled local spring onions, and

Catalan Mushrooms with Garlic & Parsley Green Salad with Olives, Manchego & Romesco Sauce Chicken Thighs Baked with Lemon, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme **Grilled Bread with** Red Peppers & Eggplant Spinach with Pine Nuts & Raisins



now I use it with abandon as a condiment for grilled meats and vegetables, as a thickener for fish soups and stews, and as a spread for sandwiches and toast.

The main event is chicken thighs baked with fresh herbs and lemon—my take on Catalan rotisserie chicken. The rotisserie version features crackly golden skin, juicy meat,

a cavity stuffed with herbs and lemon wedges, and a delicious condiment called allioli, which is like garlic mayonnaise but without the egg.

I experimented at home to try for these same results without a rotisserie. I put lemon slices in a roasting pan, topped them with fresh rosemary, thyme, and sage, and then set chicken pieces on top. My theory was that the moisture in the lemon



Spinach with Pine Nuts & Raisins



Grilled Bread with Red Peppers & Eggplant

slices would rise through the fresh herbs and become a citrusy, herby steam, which would infuse the chicken with flavor while also keeping the meat moist. I'm not sure if I'm a natural born food scientist or if I just got lucky, but the results are truly terrific. High oven heat (425°F) crisps and browns the skin, and a little *allioli* rubbed over and under the skin flavors the chicken even more. The *allioli* also seems to slightly separate the skin from the flesh so it can crisp better.

You could make this dish with any chicken part, but I use thighs because they're juicy, they cook evenly, and they have lots of skin. Also, it just so happens that one thigh fits perfectly on one lemon slice. As the chicken cooks, juices will accumulate from the lemons, the *allioli*, and the chicken, but as long as the roasting pan is large enough, the liquid won't interfere with the browning and crisping of the skin.

To accompany the chicken, try the classic combination of spinach, pine nuts, and golden raisins. This dish starts with wilted, drained spinach, which is then tossed in a skillet with toasted pine nuts and raisins. Squeeze out as much water as you can from the wilted spinach leaves,

but you don't have to get every last drop since more will evaporate during the sauté.

Serve grilled bread topped with a savory compote of charred red peppers and eggplant, called escalivada, as a side dish or as another tapa. The vegetables can be roasted or broiled, but grilling definitely tastes best. (Originally, the vegetables were tossed into fireplace embers at night and by morning they were charred and smoky, perfect for escalivada, which is pronounced ess-kah-lee-BAH-dah). No matter how you char, make sure the skins get really black all over so they'll come off without tearing or shredding the flesh. I used to be hesitant about this, having always equated burnt food with failure. In this case, however, charred skins mean successful peeling.

A sweet, natural ending. This menu is so typical of Catalan home cooks that I suggest following their lead when it comes to dessert. Reacquaint yourself with a perfectly ripe, preferably locally grown piece of fruit: a big, juicy peach, a fragrant wedge of melon, a lush pear, or a bowl of cherries or berries. Not too filling, certainly not fancy—a pleasure so simple and yet so often overlooked.

Making a classic Catalan sauce

Romesco is a major sauce in Catalan cuisine, but no single recipe fully captures all its complexities. Some are sweeter, hotter, thicker, thinner, sharper, creamier, or chunkier. Bill Devin's version is nutty, garlicky, and slightly coarse, but feel free to play around until you find the blend that most pleases you.



An undertone of sweetness. Slow oven roasting brings out the sugars in tomatoes and garlic. Get them caramelized but not burnt.



Process the dense stuff first...
Start with the toasted nuts, chile, and tomatoes to get the purée underway.



...and then add the liquid. Bill Devin pours in olive oil slowly to create an emulsified sauce, adds vinegar, and then tastes the romesco before making adjustments.

AECIPE.

Catalan Mushrooms with Garlic & Parsley

Serve these as a starter or perhaps as an accompaniment to the baked chicken. Leftovers are great on pizza or added to pasta sauce. Serves six.

1 lb. medium-size white mushrooms, stems trimmed to ½ inch, and quartered
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
¼ cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
2 Tbs. finely chopped fresh garlic
1 to 2 tsp. coarse salt or sea salt

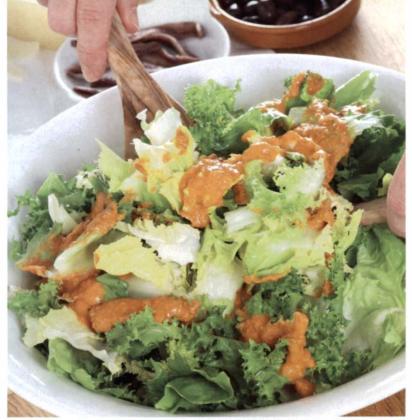
Put the mushrooms in a large bowl of cold water to soak for 10 min. Rinse them well and then drain.

Heat a large sauté pan with a tight-fitting lid over medium heat. Add the drained mushrooms to the dry pan, cover immediately, and cook until all the moisture from the mushrooms is leached out, about 20 min. You'll know this has happened when you lift the lid for a peek and see the once-dry pan filled with liquid.

Remove the lid, raise the heat to medium high, and boil until the liquid evaporates and the mushrooms begin to sizzle in the dry pan but haven't browned; they'll have shrunk considerably and should be firm when poked with a fork. Lower the heat to medium and stir in 1 Tbs. of the olive oil, the parsley, and the garlic. Sauté,



Creamy but not smooth. Process the romesco until it comes together as a sauce but not so much as to lose its coarse, nutty texture.



stirring frequently, until the garlic softens, another 3 to 4 min. Transfer the mushrooms to a serving bowl, stir in the remaining 3 Tbs. olive oil, and season with salt to taste (I like to salt them liberally). Serve while hot.

Romesco Sauce

This garlicky sauce, which originated in the city of Tarragona, has tons of variations and many uses—it's served with grilled vegetables, meat, chicken, or fish, or stirred into fish stews. Try it tossed with pasta or as a sandwich spread. It keeps in the refrigerator for at least a week. *Yields* 2½ cups.

4 medium-size ripe tomatoes (1¾ lb. total), cored

1 head garlic, sliced in half crosswise

2 Tbs. plus 1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1½ oz. (¼ cup) blanched almonds

 $1\frac{1}{4}$ oz. ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup) peeled hazelnuts

1 dried ancho chile, cored, seeded, slit, and opened so it lies fairly flat

1 tsp. coarse salt or sea salt; more to taste

2 to 3 Tbs. red-wine vinegar

2 Tbs. red wine (dry or fruity, but not oaky), if needed

1 slice stale white bread, torn, if needed

Heat the oven to 375°F. Put the tomatoes and one half of the garlic head in a baking pan. Drizzle about 1 Tbs. of the olive oil into the cored tomato wells and on top of the garlic half. Roast until the tomatoes and garlic are well caramelized but not burnt, about 90 min. From the remaining half head of garlic, coarsely chop 1 Tbs. garlic and put it in a food processor.

While the tomatoes roast, heat about 1 Tbs. of the olive oil in a small sauté pan over medium heat. Toast the almonds and hazelnuts in the pan, shaking the pan or stirring so they don't burn, until golden brown, 5 to 6 min. Cool the nuts on a paper towel and then put them in the food processor.

If using a dried chile, sear it in the same small pan over medium-high heat (keep it flat with a spatula or a fork) until a smoke wisp appears, about 10 seconds Romesco sauce as salad dressing. Bitter salad greens are hearty enough to take the sauce's bold flavor and fuller body.

Mashed garlic is the goal. A pestle is perfect for pounding garlic, salt, and olive oil to a creamy paste.

per side. Soak it in 1 cup hot tap water until soft, about 15 min. Drain and put the chile in the food processor.

When the tomatoes and garlic are caramelized, let them cool. Pinch off the tomato skins (discard them) and squeeze out the garlic pulp. Put the tomatoes and garlic pulp in the processor. Add the salt and start the processor, pouring in the remaining ½ cup olive oil in a slow, steady stream, as if making mayonnaise. Add the vinegar, pulse to incorporate, and taste; the sauce should have some zing, so add more if needed. Add salt to taste. The sauce should be thick and creamy. If it seems too thick, add 1 or 2 Tbs. red wine. If it's too thin, add bread, pulsing a few more times.

Green Salad with Olives, Manchego & Romesco Sauce

Manchego cheese has found its way into many supermarket cheese sections, but if you can't find it, try another Spanish cheese, such as Mahon (see Sources, p. 84). Serves six.

- 12 cups bitter salad greens, such as frisée, curly endive, or escarole
- 34 cup romesco sauce; more if you like (see the recipe on p. 37)
- 12 good-quality anchovy fillets, rinsed under cold water and patted dry (optional)
- 1 oz. manchego or another aged Spanish cheese, such as Mahón, shaved with a peeler
- 1/2 cup brine-cured black olives, such as kalamatas or niçoise, or dry-cured Moroccan black olives, rinsed and drained

Put the greens in a salad bowl or on a platter. Toss with the romesco sauce to lightly coat (add more if



necessary). Arrange the anchovies, if using, on top and sprinkle on shavings of cheese and the olives, or plate and garnish each serving individually. Have a pepper mill and extra romesco sauce on the table.

Chicken Thighs Baked with Lemon, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme

In addition to the lemon and fresh herbs, the chicken thighs are flavored with an emulsified mash of garlic, salt, and olive oil, called *allioli*. I like to garnish each plate of chicken with a spoonful of romesco sauce (for the recipe, see p. 37). Serves six.

2 large cloves garlic

Coarse salt or sea salt

- 3 to 4 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 12 chicken thighs, trimmed of fat, rinsed, and patted dry
- 2 large lemons, each cut into six ¼-inch rounds
 1 bunch fresh rosemary, snipped into twelve 2-inch
 pieces
- 1 bunch fresh thyme, snipped into twelve 2-inch pieces 12 sage leaves

Freshly ground black pepper

Using a mortar and pestle, mash the garlic with a large pinch of salt to create a coarse paste (or use a small mixing bowl and the back of a spoon, or mince the garlic very finely on a cutting board). Add the oil very slowly in drops while pounding and grinding the paste, continuing until the *allioli* is thick, creamy, and emulsified. Put the chicken in a bowl. Rub the *allioli* all over, including under the skin. Cover and refrigerate at least 2 hours or overnight.

Heat the oven to 425°F and set an oven rack in the middle of the oven. Arrange the lemon slices in one layer in a large shallow roasting pan or baking dish (9x13x2 inches is good). Top each slice with a piece of rosemary and thyme and a sage leaf. Set the chicken thighs, skin side up, on top; sprinkle them generously with salt and pepper. Bake until the skin is golden and the juices are clear, 45 min. to 1 hour.

Sometimes the lemons and chicken produce a lot of juices, in which case you can make a delicious pan sauce. Transfer the chicken (keeping the herbs and lemon slices underneath) to a plate and cover loosely with foil. Tilt the pan to pool the juices in one corner. Spoon off the fat that rises to the top. Set the pan over medium heat (if the pan isn't flameproof, pour the juices into a small skillet) and scrape up any stuck-on juices. Let the juices boil and reduce so they thicken to a saucy consistency. Drizzle the sauce around, not on, the chicken to maintain the crisp skin.

Grilled Bread with Red Peppers & Eggplant

The grilled vegetable compote, called escalivada, can be made up to 3 days ahead and refrigerated (drizzle olive oil over the surface and cover well) but serve it at room temperature. Bread rubbed with tomato is a classic Catalan snack, but here it's the platform for

Lemon, sage, rosemary, and thyme. This fabulous foursome lends terrific flavor to roasted chicken thighs.



These thighs have a super-crisp skin, thanks to a high oven temperature. For the best flavor, be generous with the salt and pepper.

escalivada. You could serve it as a tapa, as a side dish with the chicken, or alongside the salad. Serves six.

FOR THE ESCALIVADA:

2 medium eggplant, surfaces pricked with a fork

2 red bell peppers

2 to 3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

1 clove garlic, very thinly sliced

FOR THE BREAD AND TOMATO:
6 slices country or peasant bread
1 large clove garlic, halved
2 or 3 small ripe tomatoes, halved crosswise
Extra-virgin olive oil to taste
Coarse salt or sea salt to taste

To make the escalivada—Prepare a hot fire in a grill or heat the broiler. Put the eggplant and red peppers on the grill or in a shallow pan set under the broiler (turn on the exhaust fan). Grill or broil the vegetables until they're completely blackened and the eggplant is soft, carefully turning them every few minutes with tongs; the peppers take about 8 min. under the broiler and the eggplant about 14 min. Wrap them snugly in a paper grocery bag so they steam.

After 20 min., unwrap the vegetables and peel off the skins. Halve the peppers lengthwise, remove the core, scrape out the seeds, and cut the flesh into long, fine strips. Remove the eggplant stems but leave the seeds (unless they're unpleasantly large) and pull the flesh into thin strips with your fingers. Toss the peppers and eggplant in a bowl with the olive oil and garlic.

To make the bread and tomato—Grill or toast the bread; while it's still warm, rub a garlic half onto the crust and on one side of each slice. Rub the tomato halves on the garlic-rubbed side of the toasts so they turn rosy with pulp. Drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with salt, and pile on a tangle of escalivada. Cut the toasts in half, if large, and serve.

Spinach with Pine Nuts & Raisins

Use baby spinach when it's available; it's sweeter, less gritty, easier to clean, and there's no need to trim the stems. Serves six.

2½ lb. fresh spinach, stems trimmed, leaves rinsed
½ tsp. coarse salt or sea salt
½ cup water
¼ cup fruity extra-virgin olive oil; more to taste
½ medium onion, finely chopped
3 Tbs. golden raisins
3 Tbs. pine nuts

Put the spinach leaves in a large pot with a tight-fitting lid (if all the spinach doesn't fit, add the rest once it starts cooking and collapsing). Add the salt

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

and water and cook, covered, on medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the spinach is wilted, 2 or 3 min. Drain in a colander, let cool, and squeeze out the liquid with your hands. You'll end up with about

2 cups cooked spinach.

Heat 3 Tbs. of the olive oil in a large sauté pan set over medium heat. Add the onion and sauté until it begins to turn golden, about 5 min. Stir in the raisins and cook for another 3 to 4 min. Stir in the pine nuts and sauté until they're lightly toasted, about 3 min. Add the spinach and cook until any excess liquid has evaporated. Season generously with salt and pepper and drizzle each serving (or the whole serving platter) with the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil.

Bill Devin lives in Tarragona, Spain, where he forages for delicious local products by day and cooks them up by night. ◆



Pine nuts and chopped onions go from brown to burnt in a flash, so stir often and be ready to pull the pan off the burner to slow them down.



wine choices

A trio of wines for a richly varied menu

For starters, a Catalan sparkling wine would be a deliciously refreshing match for the salty, piquant flavors of the tapas. Leopardi Brut from Cava Llopart is full bodied with a clean, citrusy finish—and at \$12, it heads the list of life's affordable pleasures. Or go for fino sherry, a deliciously dry and nutty fortified wine that will enrich the tapas flavors (fino is the traditional match with tapas). Try Tio Pepe (\$10) or Emilio Lustau (\$12). Both the sparkling wine and the fino sherry would go well with the salad of bitter greens, too.

The chicken wants a rich, complex red wine that could also go with the sautéed spinach you might serve alongside it. I'd choose the 1994 Rioja Gran Reserva from Bodegas Montecillo (\$23), with concentrated notes of spice and black cherry. Or if you crave something lighter and less formal, a rosado (Spanish for rosé) would also be great with the main dish. I like the fruity, crisp "Gran Fuedo" by Chivite (\$8).

For dessert, choose a wine to suit the pears, peaches, or berries that Bill Devin suggests could finish off this great meal. JM Fonseca's 1990 Moscatel de Setúbal (\$20)—sweet and complex, with rich overtones of stone-fruit nectar—would be a luscious finale.

Steven Kolpan is a professor of wine studies at the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, New York



40

The Juiciest

Brining helps lean pork stay juicy, while rubs, pastes, and marinades boost flavor

BY BRUCE AIDELLS



still remember the first pork chop I ever ate. It was at a greasy spoon in Oakland that specialized in gargantuan breakfasts. Although I was a college freshman, I had never eaten pork chops before because I grew up in a pork-challenged household (bacon and ham were okay, but fresh uncured pork was not).

I couldn't have asked for a better introduction to the world of fresh pork. That first chop (actually there were two) was dusted with flour, seasoned with black pepper, and thrown on a hot griddle. Though

FINE COOKING

nter photo: Scott Phillips

Grilled Pork Chops

The rib chop below gets its delicious crust from a rosemary, sage, and fennel rub. For extra juiciness, brine the chops first.





it was thoroughly overcooked, it was nonetheless very juicy and quite delicious.

More than thirty years later, that type of fatty pork is unfortunately long gone. Today's pork comes from svelte porkers—real lean, mean machines. While that's great news for our waistlines and arteries, it means we must become better cooks to ensure great chops. Without all the fat to baste the meat as it cooks, we run the risk of getting dry, tough, tasteless chops. But if we coat the chops with flavorful

rubs and sauces, grill them to get a crisp, browned crust, and are careful not to let them overcook, the versatile pork chop can once again be succulent and full of flavor.

Pal up to the supermarket butcher for custom-cut pork chops

If you're fortunate enough to have a local butcher shop, buy your chops there. Not only will the butchers cut them to the thickness you want, they'll

Start thick chops by searing them over direct heat.

These Thaimarinated blade chops were then moved to a cooler side of the grill to cook them through. probably let you examine them up close and personal before they wrap them up.

If, like most of us, you buy your meat at the supermarket, you need to be friend the meat cutters because most supermarkets cut pork chops too thin, which makes them all too easy to ruin by overcooking. Instead, get the supermarket meat cutters to cut the chops to your specifications. They're usually happy to do this.

Freshness is the first thing to look for in a pork chop. If you can smell and touch the chops, freshness is easy to judge. They shouldn't have any off odors. The surface should be moist but not sticky or slimy, which suggests old or spoiled meat. The flesh should be fine-grained and reddish pink. The external fat should be creamy white and have no dark spots or blemishes, which also indicate advanced age. Never buy pork that's soft, pale, pinkish grey, wet, or that has a lot of liquid in the package, a sign of improper processing.

Finally, be aware that some producers "enhance" pork chops with sodium phosphate. While this ensures juiciness, it also give the meat a spongy texture that I find unpleasant.



A flare-up isn't cause for alarm but does merit a response. Move the chops to another area until the flames die down.

There's no use looking for marbling (specks of fat interspersed within the meat) because today's pork has little to none. Some cuts of pork, however, are fattier than others (see the sidebar at right).

One last thing to check is uniform thickness. I prefer thick pork chops, just because they're easier



To test thick chops for doneness, touch them (they should be firm) or take their temperature (145° to 150°F).



To check the doneness of thin chops, cut into one. The meat should be faintly pink.

to cook properly. But whether thick or thin, try to avoid chops that are thicker around the bone than anywhere else—a common problem—because they'll cook unevenly.

How you grill depends on the thickness of the chops

Charcoal or gas, covered or not, direct or indirect heat—there's a lot to consider when grilling pork chops. I prefer charcoal kettle grills to gas, although either will work as long as you set up areas of varying heat intensity. I often cover the grill for better heat regulation and to help dampen flare-ups. I choose direct or indirect heat depending on the thickness of the chops. The trick is to balance the quick browning of the outside with the slower cooking of the interior.

For medium-thick pork chops (¾ to 1 inch), I cook with direct heat. I sear both sides of the chops briefly over high heat to get a nice crust and then move them to an area of less intense heat, cover the grill, and let them cook through. To set up a charcoal fire for this kind of grilling, I have one area with a thicker layer of coals for a hotter fire and another area with a thinner layer for less intense heat. I also leave a portion of the grill with no coals in case a chop is burning, is caught in a flare-up, or is cooking too quickly. For gas grills, set one burner on medium high and another on low.

For thick pork chops (1½ to 1½ inches), I start with direct heat and finish with indirect heat. I set up one side of the grill the same way as for mediumthick chops, with varying levels of heat. The other half of the grill has no coals. For gas grills, keep one burner off. I sear the chops over direct heat, move them to the area with no heat, and cover the grill. The chops are now roasting with indirect heat, which allows them to cook through evenly without burning.

Take thick and medium-thick chops off the grill when they're between 145° to 150°F. After a five-minute rest, the juices will redistribute and the temperature will rise to 150° to 155°F, giving you chops that are faintly pink and succulently juicy. (The USDA recommends 160°F, but I don't go that high because the chops tend to get dry.) If you don't have a digital instant-read thermometer, I strongly recommend investing in one.

Grilling thin pork chops requires extra vigilance. On a hot grill, thin chops can quickly go from juicy to dried out, so you mustn't get distracted from the moment the chops go on the grill. I like to protect the surface of thin chops with a thick, flavorful coating, such as a spicy adobo paste. (When panfrying thin chops, a breadcrumb coating works well.) Grill the chops directly over high heat and quickly, only two to three minutes per side, and err on the side of undercooking; you can always throw them back on. These chops are too thin to get an accurate temperature reading, so you'll need to make a small cut to check for doneness. Look for faintly pink meat. After a two-minute rest, the chops will have cooked a bit more and will be ready to serve.

Brines, rubs, and sauces put flavor and juiciness into chops

Besides careful cooking, the surest way to get juicy chops is by brining. You could use a plain salt-water solution, but I like to throw in a few sweeteners. My favorite "flavor brine" is nothing more than water, salt, brown sugar, and molasses (see the recipe on p. 44). By bathing chops in the brine for four hours, the meat soaks up the sweetened liquid. According to food scientist Shirley O. Corriher, brining increases the amount of liquid inside the meat cells

A pork chop lexicon

All pork chops are cut from the loin, a strip of meat about two feet long that runs from the shoulder of the pig to the hip.

Starting at the shoulder blade end of the loin are *blade chops*. These have the most fat of any pork chop and great flavor, but they also have more gristle and bone and can be chewy. Their flavor and tenderness can be much improved by marinating. Because they're fatty, this cut can be cooked with long, slow, moist heat and still not dry out.

Next come *rib chops*, which are the porcine equivalent of beef prime rib. They have some fat and a great bone to gnaw on.

Moving lower down the back are *loin chops*. These lean chops, easily recognized by their T-shaped bone, are among the least flavorful, but they can be improved immensely by brining and a dry spice rub. Both rib chops and loin chops are also referred to as *center-cut loin chops*.

Down at the hip area are the bony, inexpensive *sirloin chops*. I'd only buy them if there was a big sale and I was trying to save money.

Not all chops are sold on the bone.
Boneless pork chops can come from anywhere on the entire pork loin, but without the distinguishing bones, it's difficult to know which cut you're getting. If you're buying boneless chops, ask that they be cut from the blade or rib areas, which have a little more fat and flavor.

Blade chops



Rib chops



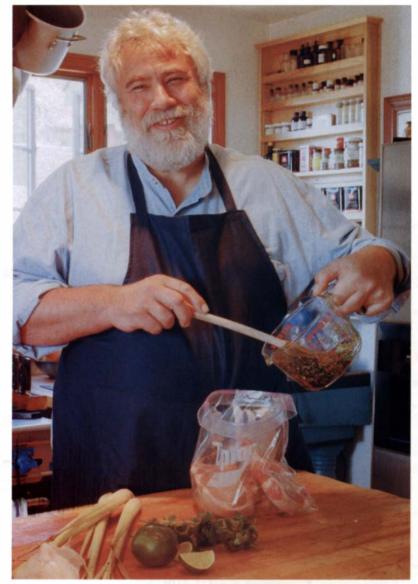
Loin chops



Sirloin chops

and helps the cells retain water. As a result, the chops turn out juicy and moist, even if you overcook them slightly.

Whether brined or not, I almost always add more flavor to chops by coating them with a dry rub, soaking them in a wet marinade, or smearing them with a paste. My favorite dry rub has sage, rosemary, and fennel seeds, but many other combinations of salt, pepper, herbs, and spices would be great. My marinades usually contain oil, spices, and a mildly acidic ingredient like lime juice, vinegar, pineapple juice, or yogurt. These don't necessarily tenderize the pork, but they do add some zing to the flavor. A paste is sort of a hybrid, something like a rub that's moistened with oil and other liquids until it's thick enough to spread on the chops. (Recipes follow)



To give blade-end pork chops great flavor, Bruce Aidells marinates them. Here, he uses a bold combination of typically Thai ingredients like lemongrass, ginger, garlic, and cilantro.

Brown Sugar & Molasses Brine

This brine helps keep pork chops juicy and adds a subtle flavor. *Yields enough for 3 to 4 lb. pork chops.*

3½ cups water ¼ cup coarse salt ¼ cup dark brown sugar 1 Tbs. molasses 1 cup ice cubes 3 to 4 lb. pork chops

Pour the water into a large bowl or plastic tub. Add the salt, sugar, and molasses and stir until dissolved. Stir in the ice so the brine chills quickly. Add the pork chops, set a plate on top to keep them submerged, and cover the bowl. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours but no more than 6 hours (less for thin chops). Transfer the pork chops to paper towels and proceed with one of the recipes that follow, or else wrap the chops in plastic and keep them refrigerated for up to 2 days.

Grilled Pork Rib Chops with Fresh Herb Rub

Serves four.

- 1 Tbs. chopped garlic
- 1 Tbs. crushed fennel seeds
- 1 Tbs. finely chopped fresh sage
- 1 Tbs. finely chopped fresh rosemary
- 2 tsp. coarse salt
- 2 tsp. coarsely ground black pepper
- 4 bone-in pork rib chops, $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch thick (2 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 lb. total), brined if you like (see the recipe at left)

In a small food processor, combine the garlic, fennel seeds, sage, rosemary, salt, and pepper. Pulse several times to blend well. Lightly coat each chop on both sides with the herb rub.

Build and light a charcoal fire so there are thicker and thinner layers of coals for areas of varying heat. For a gas grill, set one side to medium high and the other side to low.

When the thicker area of coals is medium hot (you'll be able to hold your hand just above the grate for about 2 seconds), set the chops directly over them, or over the medium-high area on a gas grill. If flare-ups occur, move the chops momentarily to a cooler area. Sear the chops over the hotter area for about 1½ min. per side and then use tongs to move them to the area that's less hot. Cover the grill and continue cooking until the chops are firm and their internal temperature reaches 145° to 150°F, another 3 to 4 min. per side.

Transfer the chops to a clean platter and let them rest for 5 min. so the juices redistribute and the chops finish cooking.

Grilled Pork Blade Chops with Thai Marinade

Serve these chops with Cilantro-Mint Sauce or Fresh Plum Salsa (see the recipes at right) or a simple Thai salad of sweet onions, cucumbers, and carrots in a sweet vinegar dressing. Serves four.

3 to 4 Tbs. finely chopped lemongrass (remove the outer leaves from 1 or 2 stalks and chop the tender centers)

1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro; more for garnish

3 Tbs. chopped fresh mint; more for garnish

2 Tbs. minced fresh ginger

2 Tbs. minced garlic

4 tsp. sugar

2 tsp. grated lime zest

½ cup Asian fish sauce (nam pla or nuoc mam)

1/4 cup soy sauce

1/4 cup canned pineapple juice

2 Tbs. peanut oil

4 pork blade chops, 1¼ to 1½ inches thick (3 to 4 lb. total), brined if you like (see the recipe at left)
Lime wedges for serving

In a bowl, combine the lemongrass, cilantro, mint, ginger, garlic, sugar, and lime zest. Stir in the fish sauce, soy sauce, pineapple juice, and oil. Put the chops in a large zip-top bag and pour in the marinade. Seal the bag and refrigerate for 8 hours or overnight, turning the bag occasionally.

What to serve with pork chops

To accompany grilled pork chops, I often serve salad and mashed potatoes, as well as a special homemade condiment, such as a fresh plum salsa or a cilantro-mint sauce.

Fresh Plum Salsa

To make this salsa, use firm plums; I like those with yellow flesh. *Yields* 2½ cups; serves four to six.

½ cup finely chopped red onion 1½ Tbs. fresh lime juice; more to taste

1/2 tsp. coarse salt

- 4 to 6 plums, split, pitted, and diced (to yield about 2 cups)
- 1 Tbs. finely chopped lemongrass
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh mint
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh basil
- 1 tsp. sugar; more to taste
- 1 fresh jalapeño, cored, seeded, and finely chopped (optional)

In a small bowl, toss the onion with the lime juice and salt. Let sit at room temperature for 30 min. to pickle lightly. Just before serving, add the plums, lemongrass, mint, basil, sugar, and jalapeño, if using. Toss to mix. Taste and add more sugar and lime juice, if you like. Serve this salsa right away so it doesn't get watery.

Cilantro-Mint Sauce

Yields 1/2 cup.

- 1¼ cups tightly packed fresh cilantro leaves
- ½ cup tightly packed fresh mint leaves
- 1/4 cup fresh lime juice, or to taste 2 Tbs. toasted sesame oil
- 1/2 tsp. coarse salt

Combine all the ingredients in a food processor and process until smooth.



When you're ready to grill the chops, remove them from the marinade and drain off and discard the liquid. It's okay if some solids adhere to the chops.

Build and light a charcoal fire with coals banked on one side only. If using a gas grill, set one side to medium high and leave the other side off. When the fire is medium hot (you'll be able to hold your hand just above the grate for about 2 seconds), set the chops directly over the heat. Sear them for about 2 min. per side, and then use tongs to move them to the area with no direct heat, arranging them so the bone side of the chop (if there is one) faces the heat (the bone acts as a barrier to the heat). Cover the grill and cook the chops indirectly until their internal temperature reaches 145° to 150°F, another 5 to 6 min. per side.

Transfer the chops to a clean platter and let them rest for 5 min. so the juices redistribute and the chops finish cooking. Sprinkle with more cilantro and mint and serve with the lime wedges.

Grilled Thin Pork Chops in Adobo Paste

In addition to grilling, these thin pork chops can be dredged in flour and pan-fried. Serves four.

1/4 cup sweet Spanish or Hungarian paprika

- 1 Tbs. minced garlic
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- 1 tsp. coarse salt
- 1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

1/4 cup red-wine vinegar

1 Tbs. olive oil 8 pork loin chops,

 $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick (about 3 lb. total), brined if you like but for no more than 1 to 2 hours (see the recipe opposite)

In a small bowl, mix the paprika, garlic, oregano, salt, pepper, vinegar, and olive oil into a smooth paste. Smear the paste generously over both sides of each pork chop. Put the chops on a platter, cover, and marinate at room temperature for 30 min. while you prepare the grill.

Build and light a charcoal fire so there are thicker and thinner layers of coals for areas of varying heat. If using a gas grill, set one side to medium hot and the other to medium. When the thicker area of coals is medium hot (you'll be able to hold your hand just above the grate for about 2 seconds), the fire is ready.

Using your fingers, scrape off most of the adobo paste and set the chops directly over the hottest part of the fire. If flare-ups occur, use tongs to move the chops to a cooler area. Grill until the chops are firm and the center is faintly pink (cut into one to check), 2 to 3 min. per side. (These chops are too thin to get an accurate temperature reading.)

Transfer the chops to a clean platter and let them rest for 2 to 3 min. so the juices redistribute and the chops finish cooking.

Bruce Aidells co-wrote The Complete Meat Cookbook with Denis Kelly. He's also the owner and founder of Aidells Sausage Company. •

Bright flavors
perk up pork
chops. Lime juice
and fresh herbs
make Fresh Plum
Salsa and CilantroMint Sauce good
partners for grilled
chops with Thai
marinade.

hotos: Scott Phillips

Caesar Salad

he legendary Caesar salad is a dish of mere happenstance. Caesar Cardini's kitchen was barely stocked when a group of guests arrived unexpectedly at his restaurant in Tijuana, Mexico. He had eggs. He had Parmesan, lemon, and lettuce. And he had condiments. So to elaborate, Cardini added drama. He prepared the salad before them so that each guest could inhale the aroma of freshly crushed garlic, hear the crack of the eggs, and watch as fine flecks of Parmesan flew from the grater. It was a grand preparation for a simple salad.

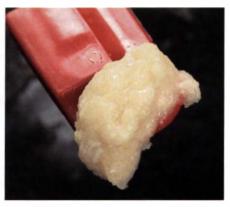
That was back in the 1920s. Today, this full-flavored salad rightfully remains a hit. Like the original, it takes little more than a half-dozen pantry basics to assemble. And while many recipes call for whirring together the dressing in a food processor or a blender, I've found that these modern-day conveniences can't replicate the perfectly creamy consistency you get when it's made by hand.

Use a mortar and pestle for an unrivaled creamy garlic base

For the dressing, a food processor merely minces the garlic, and a blender creates a dressing the consistency of a milkshake. Mashing the garlic in a mortar and pestle creates a smooth paste that makes the perfect base for this creamy dressing. The good news is that if you don't have a mortar and pestle, you can still make a similar paste on your cutting board. Mince the garlic very finely and sprinkle it with coarse salt. Then repeatedly drag the flat side of the blade at the knife's tip across the minced garlic to press into a paste, as in the photo at right. (If there's a green sprout in the garlic, be sure to remove it first—it won't mash well.) With a little diligence, you'll have a pretty good paste on your hands. Then you can mince the anchovies right on top of the garlic, scrape them both into a bowl, and continue whisking in the rest of the ingredients.

Use a mortar and pestle or your chef's knife to make a creamy garlic paste—the base for a smooth, zesty dressing

BY ANA SORTUN



Pounding garlic in a mortar and pestle yields a creamy paste. A bit of salt helps break down the garlic.



Mincing and pressing garlic and salt on a cutting board is the best way to make a paste without a mortar.

Although a whole egg is traditionally used in this salad, I prefer to add just one yolk for more concentrated richness. If a raw egg is a safety concern for you or anyone who will be eating the salad, a yolk from a soft-boiled egg is a safe substitution. Omitting the egg yolk is another option—the dressing won't be quite as rich, but it will still be delicious.

Only the crisp leaves from the romaine heart will do

I like to think of the romaine heart as being more like a vegetable. Its leaves hold up to the plentiful, rich Caesar dressing. They'll even crunch. To get to the heart, peel away the outer layers of soft, darkgreen leaves that make up about half the head. Save these leaves for a different salad another night. You'll know you're at the heart when the leaves become clutched tightly together. These leaves are crisp and hold their shape. (It's tempting to buy the pale, packaged romaine hearts at the store, but they aren't as tasty as the hearts from the whole heads.)

I also like to toss in whole leaves of flatleaf parsley. Besides adding color to the salad, the fresh parsley cuts nicely through the garlic in the dressing.

PECIA

Caesar Salad

If you don't have a large mortar and pestle, you can easily make a paste with a chef's knife (see the text for directions). Keep in mind that this is a zesty, assertive dressing that comes into balance nicely when combined with the cool, crisp romaine and salty Parmesan. Serves four to six.

FOR THE CROUTONS:

3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil 1½ cups torn pieces from a baguette or other crusty bread

Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper

FOR THE SALAD: 2 large heads romaine lettuce 2 small cloves garlic



A perfectly balanced Caesar: crisp romaine hearts and crunchy croutons for texture; parmigiano and a bold dressing for flavor.

4 oil-packed anchovy fillets, rinsed and patted dry

1 egg yolk* 1 tsp. Dijon mustard Juice from ½ lemon (about 4 tsp.) Freshly ground black pepper Dash of Tabasco or other hot sauce Scant ¼ tsp. Worcestershire sauce 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil 1/3 cup loosely packed flat-leaf parsley leaves

1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan, preferably parmigiano reggiano

For the croutons, warm the oil in a medium skillet over medium-low heat. Add the bread pieces, toss to coat, and cook, turning periodically, until golden on the outside but still tender inside, 12 to 15 min. Let them cool in one layer on paper towels. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Remove the outer leaves of romaine until you reach the tightly packed heart (the leaves will be much paler); set the outer leaves aside for another use. Separate the leaves of the heart and slice them into pieces about 3 inches long (leave the smallest leaves whole) to yield a heaping 8 cups of loosely packed leaves. Rinse and dry very thoroughly.

Put the garlic and a pinch of coarse salt in a large (3- to 4-cup) mortar. Using a



Switch from a pestle to a whisk to finish the dressing. Drizzle in the oil slowly for the creamiest results.

pestle, pound the garlic into a creamy, juicy paste (see the photo opposite). Add the anchovies, mashing until they're broken down into bits. Add the yolk, working the mixture into a paste. Work in the mustard and then the lemon juice. Blend in a pinch of black pepper, the Tabasco, and the Worcestershire. Switch to a whisk and drizzle in the olive oil, whisking continuously until blended and creamy.

Put the lettuce, parsley, and croutons in a large bowl. Season with salt and pepper and toss. Add the dressing and toss to coat thoroughly. Sprinkle with 2 to 3 Tbs. of the Parmesan and toss again. Serve immediately with the remaining cheese on the side.

*If you're serving this salad to anyone with a compromised immune system, replace the raw egg yolk in the dressing with the yolk from a soft-boiled egg, or omit the egg yolk altogether.

Ana Sortun is the chef and co-owner of

Oleana in Cambridge, Massachusetts. •

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001 47

hotos: Scott Phillips

High Heat is Best for Grilling Tomatoes

Fire-charred tomatoes give soup, salsa, and pasta an irresistible smoky-sweet flavor

BY JOANNE WEIR



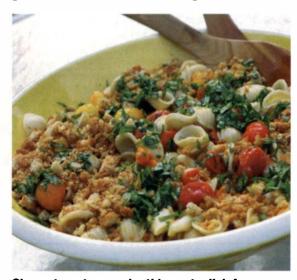
Shriveling and some blackening is what you're after for grilled tomatoes. Take them off sooner, and all you've done is warm them.

here are a few reasons why you may not automatically think of tomatoes when you think of grilling. First, there's all this talk that nothing beats a ripe, just-off-the-vine tomato (just slice, sprinkle with salt, and you're good to go). Also, there's a fear of the tomatoes bursting and making a mess of the grill. Finally, there's all that zucchini that you have to do something with.

Well, I'm a big fan of the unadorned tomato, when it's perfectly ripe and garden fresh. But even so, I can't resist what grilling does to a tomato, intensifying its flavor by concentrating its juices and giving its skin a smoky flavor that's great in all kinds of dishes. Plus, since you don't want to grill those tomatoes that are so ripe they're practically oozing, you can save those to eat raw. As for the bursting phobia: yes, occasionally, that does happen, but not often if you follow my tips for grilling tomatoes.

A fire that's hotter than you think wise

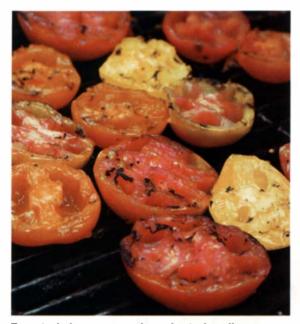
It seems counterintuitive that you'd want high heat to grill what seems like a delicate vegetable (or fruit, if



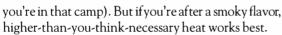
Cherry tomatoes make this pasta dish fun. You get a burst of warm, juicy, smoky tomato in practically every bite.



A sprinkling of salt adds flavor while also removing excess water. Turn the salted tomatoes over on a rack and let them drain for half an hour.



Tomato halves are much easier to handle on the grill than tomato slices. Use tongs to move them around and keep a spatula handy, too.



The tricks: the right tomato, ready tongs, and vigilance. When choosing tomatoes to grill, don't use juicy, overly ripe ones. They'll fall apart during cooking and lose all their juices in the flames. Tomatoes with thicker skins, like plum tomatoes, won't burst as easily as thinner-skinned ones, which require more vigilance.

I think food always tastes best grilled over a wood fire, and tomatoes are no exception. But all these recipes taste great with tomatoes grilled on a gas grill, too—as long as your grill has enough oomph to get a good char on the tomatoes. For a gas grill, start with the heat set on high and give it plenty of time to heat up, 15 to 20 minutes. You also might need to close the lid on a gas grill for added heat, especially if it's a little cool outside.

If you're using a charcoal grill, you want a fire that's medium hot; the coals should be thickly covered with a light-colored ash, and you should be able to keep



your hand just over the grate for only three seconds. With a charcoal fire, it's best to keep one area of the grill cooler, if possible, in case you need to move the tomatoes away from the flames. I also highly recommend using natural hardwood charcoal instead of petroleum-based briquettes for the best flavor. (For more on charcoal, see Basics, p. 80.)

Stay close, with tongs and spatula in hand. The more charred and blistered the skin, the more smoky your grilled tomatoes will taste. There's a bit of tension, therefore, between wanting to pull them off the grill before they burst and wanting to get them good and charred. Use the tongs to turn the tomatoes and leave them on until they're blackened at least in a few places; a few thin cracks won't hurt, and even a burst tomatoisn't the end of the world.

The tomato's size helps determine the best grilling method

I generally handle grilling my tomatoes differently based on their size. For cherry tomatoes, the best Grilled tomato halves drink in a bright garlic and herb vinaigrette.

These can be made ahead and served warm or at room temperature, but do dress the tomatoes while they're hot.

Preparing your outdoor grill or barbecue

Adjust the grill grate so that it's 4 to 5 inches from the flame or heat source. Heat a gas grill to high and a charcoal grill to medium hot (the coals should be covered with light ash, and you should be able to hold your hand just over the grate for no more than 3 seconds).

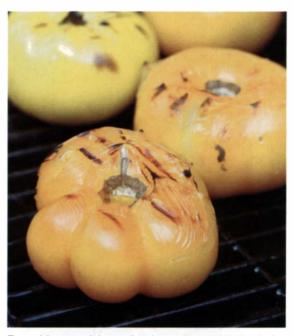
way is to skewer them; otherwise, you'll be chasing them around the grill. They can work threaded on a single skewer, but for ease of turning, try inserting two parallel skewers (see the photo on p. 48). Use very thin metal skewers, or wooden skewers that have been soaked in water for 30 minutes to keep them from burning. Don't be tempted to cut small tomatoes before skewering since this is a sure way to sacrifice them to the flames below.

Char tomatoes whole when looks don't matter. This is the simplest way of grilling tomatoes—stem on, core in—perfect for the times you're chopping the grilled tomatoes for a salad or puréeing them to various degrees for soup, such as a tomato bisque (see the recipe opposite) or for a salsa (like the one on p. 52). The flavor might not be as concentrated as you get from the method described next, but more of the tomatoes' juices are preserved.

For a colorful, summery side dish, grill tomato halves. I salt and drain halved plum tomatoes or larger tomatoes before grilling them for a side dish, which gives the flavor intensification a head start. I brush the skin side of the tomatoes with oil to help keep them from sticking and start grilling with the cut side down. (Because they can still stick a bit, have a spatula handy to help flip them; tongs alone might tear them.) When the halves are done, all I need to do is drizzle the cut side with a bit of vinaigrette, which the warm tomatoes just eat up.

I don't recommend trying to grill slices, even thick ones. The seeds and juices will most likely fall through the grates. Better to stick with grilling a half or whole tomato and slicing it carefully once cooled, if that's what you're after.

Grilled tomatoes make the easiest bisque and a summery pasta. The best part about grilled tomatoes is their versatility. They are perfect for salads, on sandwiches, in pastas, salsas, soups, or just on their own as a side dish for grilled steak, chicken, or fish. To further enhance the flavor of plain grilled tomatoes, serve them with your favorite vinaigrette—anchovy-based ones are great—and add a few chopped fresh herbs such as basil, thyme, savory, parsley, chives, oregano, or rosemary. You can also top them with capers, olives, and crumbled cheese, such as feta or Gorgonzola.



For a bisque with a twist, keep the tomatoes whole for easiest grilling and turn them until charred all over.



Basic Grilled Tomatoes

These tomatoes taste best when grilled over charcoal, preferably hardwood charcoal. They'd also be delicious with your favorite vinaigrette or even drizzled with a loose pesto. Serves six as a side dish.

6 medium-size firm tomatoes (about $2\frac{1}{4}$ lb. total) Coarse salt

1½ Tbs. red-wine vinegar

31/2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

1 clove garlic, minced

1 small shallot, minced

Freshly ground black pepper

1 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley; more whole leaves for garnish

Prepare a grill (see the box above left). Remove the green stem from the tomatoes but don't core them or cut into the tomato at all. Cut each tomato in half horizontally. Gently loosen the seeds with your fingertips. Turn the tomato over and shake to discard any loose seeds. Sprinkle the cut side of the tomatoes well with salt. Set them cut side down on a wire rack and let them drain for 30 min. In a bowl, whisk together the vinegar, 3 Tbs. of the olive oil, the garlic, and the shallot. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Lightly oil the drained tomatoes with the remaining ½ Tbs. olive oil. Arrange them cut side down on the grate and grill (turning halfway through) until the skins begin to blister and soften, 6 to 10 min.

Just before serving, add the chopped parsley to the vinaigrette. Transfer the tomatoes from the grill to a platter and drizzle with the vinaigrette. Garnish with the parsley leaves and serve hot, warm, or at room temperature.

50 FINE COOKING



Heavy cream tempers the acidity of the tomatoes and gives the bisque its body.

Grilled Yellow Tomato Bisque

This bisque can be made up to 2 days in advance. Although the yellow color is quite charming, red tomatoes can be substituted. *Yields 8 cups;* serves six.

8 large ripe yellow tomatoes (about 3½ lb. total)

- 1 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 medium-size red onion, chopped
- 1 qt. homemade or low-salt canned chicken broth
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 1 cup heavy cream

Salt and freshly ground black pepper 1/4 cup chopped fresh mint

Prepare a grill (see the box above left). Put the whole tomatoes on the grate and grill, turning occasionally, until the skins crack and begin to blacken in some parts and the tomatoes soften, 7 to 9 min. over charcoal, 12 to 15 min. on a gas grill. Take them off the grill, core them, and coarsely chop them.

Heat the olive oil in a large soup pot over mediumhigh heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft, about 7 min. Stir in the chopped tomatoes, chicken broth, and sugar. Increase the heat, bring to a boil, turn the heat to medium, and simmer until the soup is reduced by one-quarter, about 20 min. Let cool for 10 min.

In a blender, purée the soup in batches until smooth, 2 to 3 min. per batch. Strain through a finemesh sieve, pressing on the solids, into a clean soup pot and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Turn off the heat and stir in the heavy cream. Taste and season with salt and pepper. To serve, ladle the soup into bowls and garnish with the chopped mint.



Grilled Cherry Tomato Pasta with Crisp Breadcrumbs & Basil

Look for inexpensive, disposable bamboo skewers at the supermarket. To avoid burning the tips of the skewers, soak them in water for at least half an hour before grilling. Serves six as a light main dish or eight to ten as a side dish.

2 cups red cherry tomatoes (about 12 oz. total)
2 cups yellow cherry tomatoes (about 12 oz. total)
2 cups orange cherry tomatoes (about 12 oz. total)
1 cup very coarse fresh breadcrumbs

1 cup very coarse fresh breadcrumb 6 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

Salt and freshly ground black pepper 3½ to 4 Tbs. balsamic vinegar

1 lb. dried orecchiette

3/4 cup roughly chopped basil leaves

Prepare a grill (see the box above left). Thread the tomatoes on parallel skewers (see the photo on p. 48).

Heat the oven to 375°F. Put the breadcrumbs on a baking sheet, drizzle with 2 Tbs. of the olive oil, and toss to distribute the oil evenly; season with salt and

Mint is the slightly unexpected garnish for this soup. Its flavor is compelling, but you can also garnish with the more traditional basil or chives.

pepper. Bake in the middle of the oven, tossing occasionally, until the breadcrumbs turn golden brown, 8 to 10 min. Remove from the oven and let cool.

In a bowl, whisk the remaining 4 Tbs. olive oil with the balsamic vinegar. Season the vinaigrette to taste with salt and pepper.

Grill the skewered tomatoes, turning occasionally, until the skins darken and blacken in spots and begin to blister and shrivel, 5 to 7 min. Remove the tomatoes from the skewers and set aside.

The makings of a great summertime salsa. Note how the tomatoes hold their shape even while blistering; it's the rare tomato that bursts irreparably with no warning.





This sweet-smoky salsa pairs well with peppery arugula. Grilled chicken makes it a meal, but some salsa and arugula on grilled bread would make a fine lunch or appetizer, too.

Cook the orecchiette in boiling salted water until al dente. Drain and toss with the tomatoes and the vinaigrette, pour into a serving bowl, and garnish with the breadcrumbs and basil. Taste and season with more salt and pepper, if needed, and serve immediately.

Grilled Chicken-Arugula Salad with Grilled Tomato Salsa

Grilled peppers and grilled tomatoes have a great affinity. The acidity of the tomato tempers the sweetness of the charred peppers. Any extra salsa will keep in the refrigerator for up to 3 days. For a light lunch, serve the salsa and arugula with grilled garlic-rubbed peasant bread in place of the chicken. Serves six; yields 2½ to 3 cups salsa.

5 plum tomatoes (about 1 lb. total)
3 red bell peppers
1 small jalapeño
1 large clove garlic, minced
1½ Tbs. red-wine vinegar
6 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
2 cups arugula leaves, very coarsely chopped
2 oz. Parmesan cheese, preferably parmigiano reggiano, thinly shaved
12 boneless, skinless thin chicken breast cutlets (about 2¼ lb.)

Prepare a grill (see the box on p. 50). Grill the tomatoes, bell peppers, and jalapeño, turning them occasionally, until the tomato skins are cracked and blackened in spots, 3 to 4 min., over charcoal, about twice that for gas, and until the pepper and jalapeño skins are blackened, 7 to 8 min. Remove them from the grill. Let the tomatoes cool and put the peppers and jalapeño in a paper or plastic bag to steam until cool enough to handle, about 10 min. Remove and discard the skins, seeds, and membranes from the peppers and jalapeño but not the tomatoes.

In a blender or a food processor, combine the tomatoes, peppers, jalapeño (as well as the juices from the vegetables), garlic, vinegar, and 3 Tbs. of the olive oil and pulse until the salsa has a chunky consistency. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

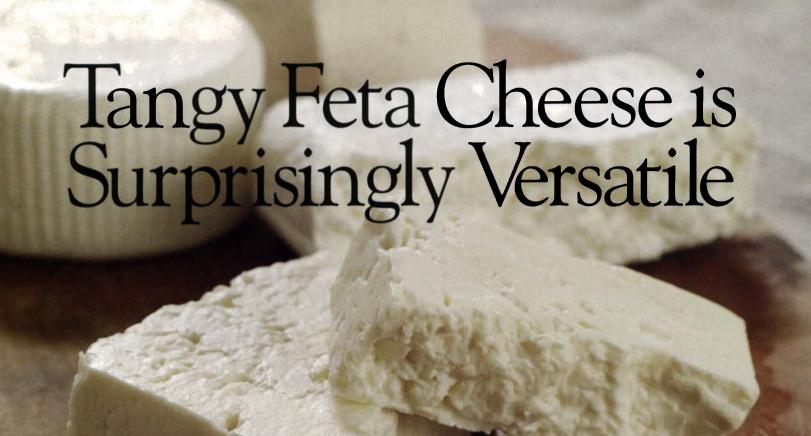
In a medium bowl, whisk the lemon juice with 1 Tbs. of the olive oil. Season with salt and pepper.

Brush the chicken cutlets with 1 to 2 Tbs. olive oil. Grill until golden on one side, about 2 min., turn them over, season with salt and pepper, and continue to grill until golden and cooked through, another 2 min.

Add the arugula and shaved Parmesan to the lemon juice and olive oil and toss together.

To serve, divide the chicken cutlets among six plates and top with the salsa and then with the arugula salad. Serve immediately.

Joanne Weir is the author of You Say Tomato, as well as Weir Cooking: Recipes from the Wine Country, and Joanne Weir's More Cooking in the Wine Country, the companion books to her public television series.



Buy it in blocks, brine it to alter its texture, and add it to salads, stuffings, and pastas

BY DAPHNE ZEPOS

reeks eat feta cheese with nearly everything—crumbled on all types of salads, stuffed in vegetables and pies, folded into casseroles, blended into dips, baked with oregano and olive oil, and most commonly, just sliced into slabs to be nibbled on throughout the meal. As a kid, I loved to mash up feta and butter into a creamy, tangy spread for my breakfast toast. My granddad taught me to pair feta with fruit like watermelon, honeydew





melon, and grapes. And I haven't even mentioned the classics like Greek salad or ripe, juicy tomatoes tossed with cubes of feta, sea salt, and olive oil.

The point isn't really that we Greeks are feta fiends (though we are; thanks in large part to all the feta we eat, Greeks have the highest per capita cheese consumption in Europe, leaving the French in the dust). It's that feta is much more versatile than you think. Its salty tanginess makes it a great flavoring for many dishes, much like Parmesan cheese, plus it adds interesting texture.

If you're not as enthusiastic as I am about this delicious, underestimated cheese, perhaps it's because you've not been properly introduced to it. Once you

One skillet serves for searing and braising. Sear fetastuffed chicken to brown the skin and then turn the pieces skin side up before braising them.

An under-the-skin stuffing melts during cooking, adding a tangy, herby note to Feta-Stuffed Chicken with Olives.





know which feta to buy and which to avoid (hint: pre-crumbled supermarket feta isn't the way to go), how to store it to modify saltiness and texture, and what foods complement its briny flavor, you'll know what all the fuss is about. Consider the following recipes for baked feta, herb salad with feta and beets, fusilli with feta and lemon-caper pesto, and feta-stuffed braised chicken (see the recipes and ideas starting on p. 56) as just a starting point for coming up with your own feta-inspired dishes.

Get to know the many sides of feta: creamy, crumbly, mild, or sharply tangy

Feta is a humble cheese. Compared to handcrafted, long-aged wheels of parmigiano reggiano or delicate wine-washed French cheeses, feta is a simple cheese to make. It's ready to eat after just six to eight weeks of quiet hibernation. Its flavor is accessible, and it complements many foods; if feta were a wine, it would be a Sauvignon Blanc.

And yet, you might be surprised to find out that feta styles can vary immensely. All fetas are rindless, white cheeses aged in brine, but some are soft and moist, others hard and dry. Some are crumbly, others more creamy. Some are salty, others more tangy. I tend to go for feta that's soft and mild, not too crumbly. I like to get pinched by the salty tanginess but left with a mellow, creamy aftertaste. But you might like another style; try different types to find out.

The differences among fetas are a result of how the cheese was made, whether it contains sheep's, goat's, or cow's milk, and how long it was cured. Traditional Greek feta usually consists entirely of sheep's milk, although it may contain up to 30% goat's milk. But feta is made in dozens of other countries too, including Bulgaria, Russia, France, Spain, Israel, and the United States. (New European Union rules will eventually restrict the name "feta" to Greek cheese; all non-Greek feta-style cheeses will be called "brined white cheese." This rule won't apply in the U.S.)

Scout out a betta feta

Not too long ago, you'd find decent feta only in Middle Eastern or Russian markets. Now, thanks in part to the artisan cheese movement in the U.S., good feta is available in cheese shops, specialty or international food stores, and occasionally even in supermarkets. Farmers' markets can be good sources, too; some small U.S. cheesemakers are making excellent feta from sheep's and goat's milk. And some of the better quality imported fetas are finding their way here as well. (For specific sources, see p. 84.)

What makes a good feta? Whether it's crumbly, hard, and dry, or soft, moist, and creamy, good feta should taste and smell fresh. Compared to most cheeses, feta has a pronounced but pleasing acidic tang. If it smells or tastes overly sour, or if it has de-



Opposites attract. The salty side of feta plays off the sweetness of steamed beets in this pretty herb salad.

veloped a peppery aftertaste, it's probably over the hill. Barrel-aged Greek feta is the most acclaimed and coveted—it develops a complex flavor by aging in wood—but some tinned fetas can be excellent, too.

Cow's milk fetas are the most common in the U.S., but to me, they fall flat in flavor. I often find them chalky and sour, sometimes with a slightly metallic aftertaste. I much prefer the richer, more intense flavor of sheep's and goat's milk fetas. Unfortunately, feta isn't always labeled with the type of milk, so you're left to ask the salesperson (who may not know) or to do some tasting until you find one you really like.

Buy feta in whole blocks, bricks, or wedges. This makes sense for the same reasons that you buy Parmesan in big chunks: it stays fresher for longer, it doesn't dry out, and its flavor packs more punch. Also, it gives you more options. Sometimes you want to slice a thick slab of feta and other times you need large crumbles. Finally, feta sold in whole pieces is often—though not always—a sign of a better-quality feta.

Avoid pre-crumbled and flavored fetas. These are the worst examples of feta cheese in the U.S. Pre-crumbled feta can hide textural problems in the cheese, while flavored feta can disguise any off flavors. As a rule, I'd opt for store-wrapped pieces of feta over vacuum-packed containers. But my first choice is always large blocks of feta held in brine. (Recipes follow)

Modify feta's texture by storing it in brine, water, or milk

Storing feta in brine not only preserves freshness, it also regulates the creaminess and saltiness. Taste the feta when you get it home (or, if possible, at the shop before you buy). If it's saltier than you would like, store it in plain water. The salt will leach out of the cheese within a day

or two. If the salt level is fine for your taste, store the cheese in the same brine in which it came, if there is any. If there is none, make your own brine (add a few hefty pinches of salt to a pint or more of water).

You can make a crumbly feta more creamy by cutting the brine with milk—about 1 or 2 tablespoons per pint of brine will do. It takes a few days for this little trick to take effect. You might need to try a few batches before you get the amounts of salt and milk just right, but the cheese won't suffer in the meantime.



Cover the feta with the brine and store in a covered plastic container in the refrigerator. A large chunk of fresh and properly stored feta should last up to three weeks.

Fusilli with Feta & Lemon-Caper Pesto

The idea here is to make a tangy, lemony pasta sauce with feta and a few pantry staples. You can make it in the time it takes to cook the pasta. I use a large Japanese mortar and pestle for the sauce—it takes about 5 minutes of pounding—but a blender is even faster. Serves four as a light main course.

FOR THE PASTA:

Salt

1/2 lb. dried fusilli pasta

1 bunch fresh spinach (10 oz.), stems cut off, leaves washed well but not dried

1/4 lb. feta, crumbled (1/3 cup)

FOR THE PESTO:

1 small clove garlic; more or less to taste

- 2 to 3 anchovy fillets (if you can get salt-packed anchovies, even better), rinsed and patted dry
- 1 Tbs. capers (preferably salt-packed), soaked briefly and rinsed

1-inch strip lemon zest, minced

3/4 oz. feta, crumbled (2 Tbs.)

1/4 cup roughly chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

2 or 3 fresh basil leaves (optional)

1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Bring a pot of water to a boil and add salt and the pasta. Cook until al dente. Reserve about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the cooking water before draining the pasta, and don't wash the pot.

agent. Blended into a sauce and crumbled on pasta, feta's great flavor and texture permeates every forkful of fusilli with spinach and lemon-caper pesto.

Feta, the double



As the pasta cooks, wilt the spinach and make the pesto in a mortar or blender as follows:

Put the wet spinach in a large skillet over medium heat. Add a dash of salt, cover, and cook for 3 to 4 min. Remove the pan from the heat, keeping the lid on; the spinach will wilt and stay bright green.

If using a blender, put in the garlic, anchovies, capers, lemon zest, parsley, basil, lemon juice, olive oil, salt, and pepper and blend until the pesto is creamy. If using a mortar, add the pesto ingredients one at a time, pounding with a pestle



Pasta water thins an intense pesto of parsley, garlic, lemon, and feta.

until well mashed and blended before adding the next ingredient. Thin the pesto with the reserved pasta water to get the consistency of runny cream; you probably won't have to use the entire ½ cup water.

Return the pasta to the pot in which it was cooked; add the spinach (drain any liquid left in the pan) and the pesto, stirring very well to coat the pasta. Stir in the $\frac{2}{3}$ cup crumbled feta and serve.

Feta-Stuffed Chicken Braised with Green Olives

You can use this under-the-skin stuffing in chicken parts or in a whole chicken, pushing it in under the skin of the thigh, drumstick, breast, back, and also in the cavity. Atalanta olives are the Greek version of picholines. A good accompaniment is bow-tie pasta or rice. Serves four.

3 oz. feta, crumbled (½ cup) ½ tsp. chopped dried rosemary ½ Tbs. unsalted butter Freshly ground black pepper to taste

3½ to 4 lb. chicken (back removed), quartered, (or 3 lb. chicken parts) rinsed, and patted dry Coarse salt

1 Tbs. olive oil

1/2 cup dry white wine

½ cup low-salt chicken broth or water

18 small unpitted olives, such as picholine, kalamata, or atalanta, if you can find them

Heat the oven to 350°F. In a bowl, mash together the feta, rosemary, butter, and pepper with a fork.

Using your fingers and a spoon, push the feta stuffing under the skin of all the chicken parts except the wing; be gentle so as not to rip the skin. Put some stuffing under the tenderloin part of the breast. Season the parts well with salt and pepper.

Heat a deep, ovenproof, 10-inch skillet on medium heat until the pan is hot, at least 2 min. Add the olive oil and sear the chicken pieces, skin side down, until the skin is golden brown, about 4 min. per piece; do this in batches if necessary. Transfer the chicken to a plate, drain the fat from the pan, and deglaze the

skillet with the wine and broth or water, scraping up any stuck-on bits to dissolve them.

Return the seared chicken (skin side up) to the skillet, add the olives, and put the skillet in the oven. Bake until the juices run clear when pricked with a fork, about 40 min. Transfer the chicken and olives to a warm plate. Boil the juices in the pan over high heat until they reduce and thicken enough to coat the back of a spoon, about 4 min. Pour the sauce over the chicken pieces and serve.

Herb. Feta & Beet Salad

This is a composed salad with four parts: beets, feta, herbs, and a very simple vinaigrette. The four elements only meet at the last minute on the plate. Serves four.

FOR THE VINAIGRETTE:

Coarse salt to taste

2 tsp. red-wine vinegar

3 Tbs. walnut oil or pecan oil

FOR THE BEETS:

11/2 lb. red beets (3 to 4 medium)

2 Tbs. red-wine vinegar

FOR THE HERB SALAD:

Tarragon leaves picked from 2 fresh sprigs (2 Tbs.) 8 fresh chives, cut into ½-inch pieces (2 Tbs.) Marjoram leaves picked from 1 fresh sprig (1 tsp.) 2 fresh basil leaves, torn into small pieces ½ bunch fresh flat-leaf parsley (½ cup packed) ¼ bunch fresh chervil

3 cups mesclun greens, or a mix of sliced sorrel, watercress, arugula, and mizuna

FOR THE FETA:

¼ lb. feta, cut into 4 slabs, each about 2 inches square and ¼ inch thick

To make the vinaigrette—In a small bowl, dissolve the salt in the vinegar. Whisk in the nut oil.

To prepare the beets—Wash the beets and cut off the leaves. Trim off the tough lower stems and discard any yellow or bruised leaves; wash and reserve any small, healthy leaves.

In a large saucepan or a stockpot with a steamer basket, steam the beets until a paring knife enters them easily, 30 to 45 min., depending on their size. Set aside until cool enough to handle but still warm. Peel the beets; the skin will pull right off. Cut them in half and then in ¼-inch slices so you end up with half-moons. Put the beets in a bowl and splash them with the vinegar while they're still warm. Toss with some of the vinaigrette, enough to lightly coat (save the rest for the herb salad).

To prepare the herbs—In a large bowl, combine all the herbs and greens (including any reserved beet leaves). Toss with enough vinaigrette to just lightly coat the leaves.

To compose the salad—On a large serving platter, arrange the beet half-moons. Lay the feta slabs on the beets, and then pile the herb salad on top. You could also arrange the salad in the same way on four individual serving plates.

Daphne Zepos is a former chef, a board member of the American Cheese Society, and a cheese consultant. •

Beyond Greek salad: more ways to cook with feta

Here are a few ideas to expand your feta cheese recipe repertoire.

- ◆ Feta baked in foil. Put a ¾-inchthick slab of feta on a sheet of foil. Sprinkle on dried red chile flakes and dried oregano; drizzle with olive oil. Wrap the feta in the foil, and bake at 350°F until it's softened but not mushy, about 10 minutes. Unwrap the foil at the table and serve the warm feta with bread, lemon wedges, and perhaps more oil.
- ◆ Scrambled eggs with tomatoes, basil, and feta, called strapatsada in Greece. Cook a chopped onion until softened, add sliced tomatoes and salt, and cook until the tomatoes break down and the juices evaporate. Beat 5 or 6 eggs, season with salt and pepper, and scramble the eggs in the pan with the saucy tomatoes. Just before the eggs are done, stir in chopped feta and chopped fresh basil.
- Feta and olive oil dip. This spread, called chtipiti (pronounced SHTI-pity), is part of the constellation of Greek meze (the equivalent of Spanish tapas). You can spread it on bread and top with roasted red peppers or serve as a dip for raw vegetables. Blend ½ pound roughly crumbled feta with 1/4 cup milk until grainy. With the blender running, slowly pour in 1/4 cup extravirgin olive oil and blend to a thick glossy cream. Stir in minced fresh jalapeño to taste. To mellow the tang of the dip or get a creamier texture, mix in 2 or 3 tablespoons cream cheese.
- ◆ Cretan bread salad. Start with the basic framework for a classic Greek salad: coarsely chopped ripe, juicy tomatoes, cucumbers, and olives, plus a few morsels of crumbled feta. Then add capers, dried oregano, sliced bell peppers, fresh dill, chopped scallions, and chopped onions—be sure to salt



Feta baked in foil



Feta and olive oil dip

the tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions so they relinquish their delicious juices—and toss with extravirgin olive oil. In Crete, they moisten whole-wheat rusk (a thick slice of dried-out bread) with a little water or tomato pulp and pile the salad on top so the rusk soaks up the juices and softens. If you can't find rusk, use cubes of stale bread and toss with the salad.

- ◆ Onion and feta tart. Fill a shallow baked tart shell with caramelized sliced onions (cooked until they're jammy), crumbled feta, and ribbons of sautéed leeks piled on top. Serve at room temperature or bake at 350°F for about 10 minutes.
- Cornbread with feta. Make your favorite cornbread recipe and fold small cubes of feta into the batter just before baking.

Show Off Plums in Two

How to make the most of summer's plums? We asked two pastry chefs for their inspiration



BY KAREN BARKER & CLAUDIA FLEMING COMPILED BY AMY ALBERT

hen summer's in full swing, one of the most seductive sights at farmers' markets and produce stands is plums. From flame red to ruby to deep purple, fragrant, juicy and ripe...how can you resist? You buy a basketload, and they're great for eating straightaway—but what else can you do with all these plums?

We invited two of our favorite pastry chefs—Karen Barker from Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina, and Claudia Fleming from Gramercy Tavern in New York City—to try our "Market Basket Challenge" and asked them each to improvise a plum dessert using a limited number of ingredients and following the game rules at right. Here's what each chef came up with, along with the technique and reasoning behind her inspiration.

Rules of the game

Karen and Claudia started with any type of plum they wanted, in any amount. They were allowed to use unlimited ingredients from a basic bakers' pantry and to choose up to three wildcard ingredients.

Market ingredient: Fresh plums (any type, any amount).

Basic baker's pantry: Baking powder, baking soda, butter, canola oil, eggs, flour (all-purpose, cake, and pastry), heavy cream, lemon juice, milk, olive oil, pepper, salt, sugar (white, brown, and confectioners'), vanilla extract, water.

Wildcards: Any condiment, flavoring, fruit, herb, nut, spice, or starch.

Photos: above, Scott Phillips; all others, Amy A

Summer Desserts



Karen Barker turns plums upside down

When I see plums at the market, I think of old-fashioned sorts of desserts like upside-down cake, which is the perfect showcase for plums for a couple of reasons. The plum juices get absorbed by the cake, and they moisten the brown sugar for a topping that's the right degree of gooey. I love the contrast of sweet cake and tart fruit, as well as the contrast of brightly colored skins and pale cake. Because I like the look of individual desserts, I decided to bake the cakes in individual one-cup ramekins, rather than baking one big cake.

For this particular recipe, I try to find smaller plums if possible, so I can get slices that are small enough to arrange in a circle in the bottom of the ramekins. Red Casselmans or Santa Rosas give you distinct color contrast (I leave their red skins on), but any ripe, firm plum will do. If you can't find small plums, just use fewer slices.

Rather than a traditional caramel, I use a brown sugar and butter mixture to line the ramekins, which creates the topping for the upside-down cake. Brown sugar's toasty notes are especially good against a



Upside-down cakes take full advantage of a plum's juiciness. Juices help make a gooey topping that the cake in turn sponges up; vanilla ice cream is the perfect complement.



plum's tartness. To give the cake a bit of tang as well as a tender crumb, I soured regular milk with some lemon juice (buttermilk is traditionally used, but I don't always keep it on hand).

I chose cinnamon and orange zest as my wildcard ingredients because they accentuate the plums' flavor without overpowering it. I opted not to use a third wildcard because the cake doesn't need it, but you could always spike some whipped cream with Grand Marnier to serve on top.

These upside-down cakes can be baked several hours ahead of time and reheated for about two minutes at 350°F before serving. This makes it a cinch to turn the cakes out of their ramekins, and it restores their soft texture. Because plums are really juicy, I suggest baking and reheating the cakes on a rimmed baking sheet in case the juices bubble over.



Plum Upside-Down Cakes

Use the smallest plums you can find that are ripe but firm. Red plums like Casselmans and Santa Rosas work well, as do Black Friars. If you can't find very small plums, just use fewer slices of regular-size ones. Serves eight.

10 oz. (2½ sticks) unsalted butter, softened at room temperature; more for greasing the ramekins
 3/4 cup firmly packed brown sugar

6 medium-size ripe but firm red plums, pitted and sliced 1/8 inch thick

½ cup plus 1 Tbs. milk 1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice 6 oz. (1½ cups) cake flour 1 tsp. baking powder ¼ tsp. baking soda ½ tsp. ground cinnamon

½ tsp. ground cinnamon ¼ tsp. salt

1 cup sugar Grated zest of 1 orange

2 large eggs 2 tsp. vanilla extract

Butter eight 8-oz. ramekins. Heat the oven to 350°F. In a medium saucepan over medium heat, combine 6 oz. (1½ sticks) of the butter with the brown sugar, whisking until smooth and combined (you'll still feel

whisking until smooth and combined (you'll still feel sugar granules). Immediately pour into the bottoms of the buttered ramekins, dividing evenly. Arrange a layer of plum slices in each ramekin, overlapping them slightly, using smaller slices to fill any gaps.

In a small bowl, combine the milk and lemon juice (the mixture will curdle; this is okay). In another bowl, sift together the cake flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, and salt.

With an electric mixer, cream the remaining 4 oz. (1 stick) butter with the sugar and the orange zest. Add the eggs and vanilla; mix to combine. Alternately add the dry ingredients and the milk mixture, mixing just to combine. Divide the batter among the ramekins. Arrange the ramekins on a rimmed baking sheet and bake until the cakes are firm to the touch and the

juices are bubbling, 35 to 40 min., rotating the sheet midway through baking to ensure even cooking. (If you insert a skewer to test doneness, it may be moist with plum juices but should show no raw batter). Let cool on a rack until warm. Run a paring knife around the inside edge of each ramekin, invert onto a plate, and gently lift it off the cake. Top each cake with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, if you like. If you've baked the cakes ahead, heat the oven to 350°F. Set the ramekins on a rimmed baking sheet and heat until just warmed, about 2 min.

Karen Barker, a pastry chef, is co-owner of Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina.



Plums are a late-summer fruit with a richness that begs for full, spicy seasoning. When I'm at the farmers' market and feel the air start to change in that late-summer way, warm, rich flavors start to tempt me again.

I chose Italian plums for my market ingredient: I love Italian plums for cooking because they don't fall apart the way juicier ones usually do (although juicier plums are delicious for eating out of hand).

A plum's sweet, tart flavor is bolder than that of berries or peaches, so I chose cardamom and cinnamon as two of my wildcard ingredients to season my cobbler. Their warmth matches the plums' rich flavor—and rich color. I keep the skins on the plums, rather than peeling them, which creates an irresistible purply-red jam that bubbles around the topping as the cobbler cooks.



Slightly overlapping plums line the ramekins. Fill any gaps with

smaller slices,

if possible.

skin side down,

60



And speaking of those juices, managing them is a main concern when you're working with any type of plum. Because the fruit (if it's truly ripe) contains so much water, a pie just isn't a good idea: the crust will get wet and soggy, and you'll miss the delicious textural contrast of crisp crust and soft, cooked fruit that's the whole point of a pie.

A cobbler is a great destination for juicy plums: you can have your crust and it won't be soggy. The biscuit topping absorbs juices, but you'll still get all that buttery flakiness. My third wildcard ingredient, turbinado sugar, adds a lovely sparkle to the biscuit topping (it's light amber and coarser than regular) but regular sugar is fine, too.

I like to serve this cobbler with cinnamon-cardamom ice cream, but topping it with *crème fraîche* or vanilla ice cream is just as good.



Italian Plum Cobbler

Bigger Empress plums work well as an alternative to Italian prune plums, as do apricots. Or try a combination of plums and apricots. Serves six to eight.

FOR THE COBBLER DOUGH: $7\frac{1}{2}$ oz. ($1\frac{2}{3}$ cups) all-purpose flour

3½ Tbs. sugar

 $1\frac{1}{2}$ Tbs. baking powder

1/8 tsp. salt

3 oz. (6 Tbs.) cold unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch

3 cup plus 1 Tbs. heavy cream

1 tsp. turbinado sugar (also called sugar in the raw)

FOR THE FILLING:

 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. ground cinnamon

1/4 tsp. ground cardamom

1/4 cup sugar

To make the cobbler dough—In a food processor or an electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, combine the flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt. Pulse or mix to combine. Add the butter and then pulse or mix until the mixture resembles fine crumbs. Add % cup of the cream and pulse until the dough just comes together, scraping down the paddle and bowl if necessary. Turn the dough onto a lightly floured surface and gently pat it together, incorporating any stray crumbs. Shape the dough into eight 2-inch balls. Set each ball on a baking sheet and flatten slightly. Refrigerate for at least 20 min. but no longer than 2 hours.

To make the filling—Heat the oven to 350°F. In a large bowl, combine the plums, cinnamon, cardamom, and sugar; toss well. Spoon the fruit into a 2-qt. gratin dish or other shallow casserole dish (don't use a metal dish). Arrange the flattened dough balls on top of the fruit, leaving about 1 inch of space around each biscuit. Brush the biscuits with the remaining 1 Tbs. cream and sprinkle with the turbinado sugar. Bake on a baking sheet until the fruit is bubbling and the top is lightly browned, 40 to 45 min. Serve hot or warm, topped with *crème fraîche* or vanilla ice cream, if you like.

Claudia Fleming is the pastry chef at Gramercy Tavern in New York City. ◆ A cobbler showcases plums brilliantly, too, with appetizing deep-purple juices and a top that's good and crusty.

Discover the Sweetness of Leeks

Sauté, simmer, or grill leeks to bring out their velvety texture and uniquely complex flavor

BY DAVID TANIS

eeks deserve more attention than they get, and I think so for a few reasons. For starters, they're useful in so many dishes—in the same league as carrots, onions, and celery, and they make a great base for delicious stuffings, stews, soups, and sautés.

But a leek's unique combination of silky texture and herbal-sweet flavors can take center stage, too. A leek can stand up to bold flavors, becoming a delicious vegetable in its own right. Give leeks a try this way and I guarantee you'll welcome this sweet and versatile vegetable into your repertoire.

A leek is like an onion, but greener-tasting

The flavor of a leek is like onion but more herbaceous, though not like any herb in particular, and in fact it marries well with nearly all herbs. But while onions add a single-edged sweetness, leeks add both sweetness and vegetable flavor. This is why they give depth and complexity and why, as a stand-alone vegetable, they're especially interesting and flavorful.

Leeks are often associated with spring: That's when small, young ones first start to show up at market. But in climates like the Pacific Northwest, where it's not too hot and not too cold, leeks are farmed commercially almost yearround; this is why they're available around the country most of the year, though regions and climates will

vary. Leeks that have over-wintered or have been exposed to a lot of cold in the field can have a whitish, fibrous seed stalk running down the center, which you'll want to discard.

At the market, look for firm, green leeks with the roots still attached; pass on any that are limp, pale, or withered. Fresh leeks will keep in the refrigerator for up to a week wrapped loosely in a damp towel.

You'll use the bottom white part and a bit of the light green. A leek's dark green leaves are generally too tough for eating, but they're a flavorful addition to anystock. Large and medium-size leeks are what you'll most

often find at market. But if you see small, tender baby leeks, grab them. You can use just about the entire stalk, and they're wonderful grilled and in stir-fries, vegetable sautés, and salads.

You'll need to wash leeks carefully. They grow in sandy soil that's mounded up around them, which is how most of the stalk stays white. Grit nestles easily be-

tween the many leaf sheaves, so thorough cleaning is always required. This only takes a few minutes, but it's a must so that the silky pleasures of your perfectly prepared leeks won't be marred by a mouthful of grit. For more on cleaning, see the photos on p. 64.

Leeks can handle bold flavors

You'll often see leeks paired with rich ingredients, like cheese and heavy cream in potato gratins, leek and potato soups, and creamy pasta dishes. While I love those combinations and have included some in the recipes starting on p. 64, I'm particularly fond of pairing leeks with bold, assertive flavors.

Resinous herbs like thyme and sage are delicious with leeks; the Salmon Fillets with Herbed Leeks gets a healthy dose of these herbs. A good amount of garlic is great with leeks, too. You'd think this would be gilding the lily, so to speak, but surprisingly, it isn't. In my soup recipe, several cloves of garlic simmer with the leeks; they bolster rather than overpower the leek's flavors. And a robust roasted pepper vinaigrette is a great way to sauce the grilled leeks. A mustard vinaigrette with capers and fresh herbs is also delicious on grilled leeks.

Thorough cooking turns leeks velvety

While garlic, scallions, and onions can be tossed into a dish raw, leeks must always be cooked, and when



Grilled leeks are sweet but assertive. For a delicious appetizer, finish them with a bell pepper vinaigrette and crumbled goat cheese. "And don't forget some good bread and a young rosé," says David Tanis.

Chopped or whole, leeks always need thorough washing



Swish chopped leeks in a water bath. Leave the leeks floating in lukewarm water for 5 to 10 minutes so any grit settles to the bottom, and then lift them out carefully. Repeat if necessary.



Butterfly whole leeks for easier washing. Slice them lengthwise without cutting through the bottom layers. Fan open the leaves before washing.



Rinse the butterflied leeks under lukewarm running water. Then submerge them in a bowl or sink full of lukewarm water, shaking vigorously. Leave the leeks floating in the water for 5 to 10 minutes so that any grit settles to the bottom, and then lift them out carefully.

grilled, they first need a short parcooking. And while some vegetables benefit from *al dente* cooking, leeks definitely aren't one of them. Which isn't to say that they should be cooked to death, but in order to get tender, velvety leeks, you must cook them until they're soft or you'll get a fibrous, indigestible result.

One thing to watch out for is sticking in the pan. Leeks contain sugars just like onions do, but they can be more prone to sticking because they contain less moisture. In the recipes where I've called for sautéing leeks uncovered, I've been sure to call for enough butter or olive oil to prevent any sticking or scorching problems. Another good way to avoid this is to cook sliced, rinsed leeks with droplets of water still clinging to them and just a little bit of fat in the pan, as in the salmon recipe at right.



Leek & Potato Soup

Part of this soup is puréed to add body, but it remains chunky and chowder-like and is also good chilled. If you make it ahead and reheat it, you may need to thin it with a bit of water. Yields 6 cups; serves four to six.

- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 Tbs. unsalted butter
- 2 large or 3 medium leeks (root and dark green parts removed), sliced crosswise (to yield 2 cups), washed, and dried
- 1 small onion, diced
- 1 tsp. coarse salt; more to taste
- 1 hearty sprig fresh thyme
- ½ bay leaf

Small pinch saffron, crumbled

Pinch cayenne

- 4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 12 oz. Yellow Finn, Yukon Gold, or other medium starch potatoes, peeled and diced (to yield 2 cups)
- 4 cups homemade or low-salt canned chicken broth
- 2 Tbs. minced fresh flat-leaf parsley
- Crème fraîche, for serving
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste



Leek and potato soup is good hot or cold.

A dollop of créme fraîche adds richness and tang.

In a heavy-based pot, heat the olive oil and butter until quite hot. Add the leeks, onions, and salt, and then turn the heat to medium low. Add the thyme and bay leaf. Cook slowly, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are slightly softened and a bit browned, 10 to 15 min. Add the saffron, cayenne, and garlic; cook, stirring, for 1 min. Add the potatoes and chicken broth. Increase the heat and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to a bare simmer, cover, and cook until the potatoes are tender, about 15 min. Discard the thyme sprig and bay leaf. Transfer 1 cup of the soup to a blender to purée and then return the purée to the pot. Adjust the seasonings. Ladle into shallow bowls; garnish with the parsley, *crème fraîche*, and pepper.

Salmon Fillets with Herbed Leeks

A bed of herbed leeks perfumes baked fish and makes a delicious garnish. Halibut or snapper would work as nicely as salmon. Serves four.

FOR THE FISH:

4 salmon fillets (6 oz. each)
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
Extra-virgin olive oil
4 leaves fresh sage
4 sprigs fresh thyme
Grated zest of ½ lemon

FOR THE LEEKS:

1 Tbs. unsalted butter

2 Tbs. olive oil

3 large or 4 medium leeks (root and dark green parts removed), diced (to yield 3 cups), washed, and dried

 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt; more to taste

4 cloves garlic, minced

1 Tbs. minced fresh sage

1 Tbs. minced fresh thyme

Freshly ground black pepper

Season the fish fillets with salt and pepper. Drizzle them lightly with olive oil, rub them with the sage and thyme, and spread with the lemon zest. Lay a sage leaf and a sprig of thyme on each fillet. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to an hour.

Heat the oven to 400°F. In a wide, heavy sauté pan, heat the butter and olive oil until very hot. Add the diced leeks, stir to coat well, and reduce the heat to medium low. Salt them lightly, stir again, and continue to cook slowly until the leeks are soft, about 15 min., stirring occasionally and adding a few tablespoons of water if the pan gets too dry or the leeks are browning too much. Add the garlic, chopped herbs, salt, and pepper and cook for a few minutes until the garlic is soft and fragrant. Spread the leeks in the bottom of a $2\frac{1}{2}$ -qt. ovenproof baking dish. Lay the fish fillets on top and bake until a paring knife inserted in the fish feels warm when touched to your lip, about 20 min. To serve, spoon the herbed leeks over each fillet.

Grilled Leeks with Roasted Pepper Vinaigrette & Goat Cheese

To make the vinaigrette ahead, char the peppers under a broiler flame instead of a grill fire and be sure to whisk the vinaigrette just before serving. Any leftover dressing is good with all sorts of grilled or



steamed vegetables and with arugula, too. Try a combination of red and yellow peppers. Serves four as a first course; yields 1 cup vinaigrette.

2 small or 1 large red bell pepper (enough to yield 1 cup roasted)

1 small clove garlic, minced

2 Tbs. sherry vinegar

Pinch cayenne

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil; more for preparing the leeks

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste 8 medium leeks, root end intact (dark green parts removed), halved lengthwise, and washed 2 oz. goat cheese

2 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley or basil

To make the vinaigrette—Prepare a grill fire. Slice off the tops and bottoms of the peppers and make an incision down the length of each pepper. Flatten each into one long piece; remove the ribs and seeds. Char the peppers skin side down over a medium-hot fire until the skins are blackened and blistered. Transfer to a small bowl, cover with plastic, and let steam. When cool enough to handle, remove and discard the skins. Put the flesh in a food processor, along with the garlic, vinegar, and cayenne; purée until smooth. With the motor running, pour the olive oil through the feed tube in a slow, thin stream. Adjust the seasonings and thin with a bit of water if needed (it will be fairly thick).

To prepare the leeks—Simmer the leeks in well-salted water until tender, 3 to 5 min. Arrange on a platter and let cool to room temperature. Drizzle with olive oil; season with salt and pepper. Grill the leeks over a medium-hot fire until charred, 3 to 4 min. per side. While they're still warm, drizzle them with the vinaigrette, crumble the goat cheese over the top, sprinkle with the parsley, and serve.

David Tanis is a chef at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. ◆

A bed of herbed sautéed leeks turns into a tasty garnish when the salmon is served.

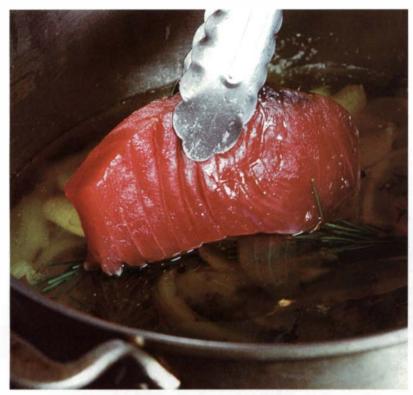


A Great Way to Cook Fresh Tuna

Transform the flavor and texture of this meaty fish by gently cooking it in olive oil, and then enjoy it in pastas and salads

BY LISA HANAUER

n a trip to France several years ago, I had a taste of tuna from a can that changed my life. Well, maybe I won't go that far, but it certainly changed the way I cook tuna. I actually wanted the tuna can as a souvenir—a lovely vibrant yellow with a lavish graphic of an olive branch, labeled Thon à l'huile d'olive vièrge extra (tuna in extra-virgin olive oil). Already, that sounded a whole lot better than the redundantly named American lunchbox standard "tuna fish." But I had no idea just how different this canned tuna would be. The can of tuna from Brittany contained sumptuous slices of delicately flavored fish, satin-textured and surrounded by good, fruity olive oil. This was no ordinary tuna fish. What it was, I discovered a few years later, was tuna confit. And to my delight, I could make it at home.



Pick a beautiful piece of tuna. This one practically glows with freshness, meaning the tuna confit will taste better and store well for up to two weeks.



Top off the tuna with enough oil to keep the fish covered during cooking. The exact amount you'll need will depend on the shape of your pan.

Infuse the tuna with flavor as it gently cooks

Confit (pronounced kohn-FEE) traditionally refers to the preserving of seasoned pork, duck, or goose by slowly poaching the meat in its own fat and then storing it in the strained rendered cooking fat. With a bit of culinary license, this method lends itself wonderfully to fresh tuna. While tuna lacks enough of its own fat to render, olive oil provides the perfect cooking and storing medium.

I first tried salting the tuna in advance of poaching it in oil (which you usually do when "confiting" meat or poultry), but I discovered that the fish absorbed too much salt too quickly. Instead, seasoning the oil well with salt and with aromatics such as rosemary, thyme, lemon zest, onion, and black pepper was the right way to handle the seasoning, and it makes any further seasoning of the fish unnecessary.

Finding the tuna is the only hard part about this method. You need to use very fresh, good-quality fish. If you have a choice, select a fattier tuna such as yellowfin or ahi, which will result in a more moist and flavorful confit than the leaner, milder tombo.

Take your time and check the temperature

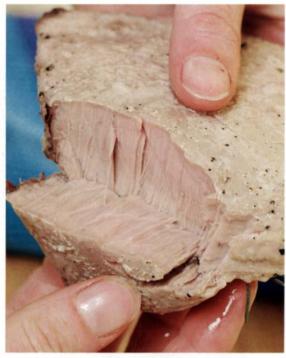
The key to cooking the tuna to velvety perfection is patience. If you let the oil become too hot, the flesh



A full meal in a light, colorful package. For better balance in this Salade Niçoise with Tuna Confit, be sure to toss each vegetable and the greens separately with the vinaigrette before arranging them all on the platter.



Don't try guesstimating. The tuna needs to cook gently, so it's best to use a thermometer.



Light pink means the tuna is still tender. If you like it more rare, cook it less; just don't overcook it and toughen it.



The author's inspiration for her tuna confit recipes began with a charming can of tuna from Brittany.

of the fish will seize, and the result will be one tough tuna. I sometimes turn the heat off and on again under the oil to regulate the temperature—you definitely need to pay attention and use a thermometer. To be really certain of the temperature, you should check your thermometer first by putting it in boiling water to be sure it reads 212°F (unless of course you're at very high elevations; at 5,000 feet above sea level, for instance, it should read 203°F).

The tuna is done when it's still tender to the touch and slightly pink inside; the fish will continue to cook as it rests in the cooling oil. Store the tuna confit in a glass or crockery container (or a more prosaic but highly functional container like a Tupperware-type box), completely covered by the strained cooking oil. It can then be refrigerated and stored for up to two weeks, ready for you to break off a few chunks whenever you want to make one of the following salads or pasta dish. Or even a tuna fish sandwich—why not?

These recipes work with canned tuna, too

A note on the following recipes that I've designed around the tuna confit: They also taste great with grilled fresh tuna or even plain old tuna in a can. For canned tuna, I prefer a light tuna in oil (as opposed to the white or albacore, or tuna in water, which I find so bland and dry). Progresso sells a good one. (For mail-order sources, see p. 84.) And of course, if you're in Brittany, look for the yellow label....



Master Recipe for Tuna Confit

This recipe can be doubled easily. Be sure to use very fresh tuna, and to use a deep-frying or candy thermometer to monitor the oil temperature. *Yields 2 pounds*.

- 3 cups good-quality olive oil (but not best); more if needed to cover the tuna during cooking
- 1 medium yellow onion, cut in ½-inch slices
- 2 sprigs fresh rosemary
- 6 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 tsp. black peppercorns, coarsely cracked
- Zest of 1 lemon, pared in strips
- 3 Tbs. coarse salt
- 2 lb. top-quality fresh tuna (yellowfin or ahi), cut into 1-inch-thick steaks

Combine the oil, onion, herbs, peppercorns, lemon zest, and salt in a deep sauté pan or Dutch oven. Heat to between 140° and 150°F, stirring occasionally, and cook for 20 min. to infuse the flavors of the aromatics into the oil and to pasteurize it for a long shelf life. Taste the oil; it should be slightly salty. Leave to cool and infuse for about 30 min.; the oil will be warm.

Put the pan back over medium-low heat and slip the tuna into the barely warm oil. (Add as many pieces as will fit in one layer. The tuna must be covered by the oil; add more if needed.) Slowly bring the oil to 150°F again. Turn off the heat, take the pot from the



heat, and let the tuna cook slowly in the warm oil. After a minute or two, test for doneness by breaking into the flake of the tuna. The fish should be cooked to medium rare—slightly pink inside and still tender to the touch. If the tuna isn't quite done, return it to the oil for another minute. Repeat with any remaining pieces of tuna.

Transfer the tuna to a storage dish (I prefer glass or crockery, but an airtight plastic container will do fine) and let it cool. Let the oil cool separately and then strain the oil over the fish, discarding the aromatics. If the tuna isn't completely covered in oil, add more fresh olive oil to the storage dish. If not using right away, cover the container tightly and refrigerate. The tuna will keep, covered in oil and refrigerated, for up to 2 weeks.

White Bean Salad with Fresh Tuna Confit

Dressing the white beans in the oil and vinegar while they're still warm will allow them to absorb the flavor of the vinaigrette, and adding the onion at the same time will mellow the flavor of the onion without cooking it. Serves four to six.

1 cup dried small white beans, such as cannelini or navy, soaked overnight, drained, and cooked in plenty of salted water until done but not mushy (or use two 15½-oz. cans cooked white beans, thoroughly rinsed and drained)

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

- 3 Tbs. red-wine vinegar
- 1 small onion, finely diced to yield $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (red onion looks nice)
- 4 scallions (white and light green parts only), chopped
- 3 Tbs. chopped fresh tender herbs, such as flat-leaf parsley, mint, cilantro, or basil, or a mix
- ½ Ib. fresh tuna confit (see the recipe opposite), drained and flaked into bite-size pieces (or use two 6-oz. cans light tuna in oil, drained)
- 12 cherry tomatoes, halved (or 1 large, firm ripe tomato, diced)

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

While the beans are still warm, toss them with the olive oil, vinegar, onion, and scallions. (If you're using canned beans, heat them gently before dressing them.) Allow to cool fully. When cool, fold in the herbs, tuna, and tomatoes, adjusting the vinegar as needed. Season to taste with salt and pepper and serve at cool room temperature. (More recipes follow)

So quick, so good.

If you've got tuna
confit in the fridge
(and a can of beans
in the cupboard),
this main-dish salad
is on the table in

a snap.



Bright flavors in each bite. Contrast adds a lot of life to this penne pasta dish: sweet caramelized onions, tangy lemon, salty olives, meaty tuna, and juicy tomatoes.

Penne with Fresh Tuna Confit

The rich tuna is counterbalanced by the sweetness of the sautéed onion, the intensity of the sun-dried tomatoes, and the acidity of the lemon. Serves three to four.

 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil

1 small yellow onion, thinly sliced Salt

1/2 lb. dried penne pasta

1 clove garlic, minced

1 cup chopped tomato, with juices

1/4 cup chopped, drained oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes (or rehydrated plain sun-dried tomatoes)

Grated zest and juice of ½ lemon

¾ Ib. fresh tuna confit (see the recipe on p. 68), broken into 1-inch pieces (or two 6-oz. cans light tuna in oil, drained)

1/2 cup whole kalamata, niçoise, or other good-quality black olives, pitted and coarsely chopped

2 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley Freshly ground black pepper

Heat the olive oil in a sauté pan over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until very soft and lightly caramelized, about 15 min. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of water to a boil, salt it generously, and cook the pasta. When the pasta is *al dente*, drain it and keep it warm (reserve about ½ cup of the cooking water to loosen the finished dish, if necessary).

Add the garlic to the onion and cook, stirring frequently, until the garlic is soft and fragrant, about 1 min. Add the chopped tomato, sun-dried tomatoes,

lemon zest, and lemon juice and simmer briefly. Add the tuna, olives, and parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste. Heat through and toss with the hot pasta, adding a few drops of the pasta water to moisten the dish, if you like. Serve immediately.

Salade Niçoise with Fresh Tuna Confit

The trick to helping each ingredient taste its best is to dress each one separately before arranging it on the plate or platter. Serves four.

4 large eggs

Salt

- 1/2 lb. tender young salad greens (mesclun, butter lettuce, baby romaine), washed and thoroughly dried
- 12 small new potatoes, boiled or roasted until tender, cut in half or quarters
- ¼ lb. haricots verts or other fresh green beans, cooked in boiling salted water until al dente
- 2 medium tomatoes, cut into 8 wedges each (or 16 cherry tomatoes)
- ½ lb. fresh tuna confit (see the recipe on p. 68), drained and flaked into bite-size chunks (or use two 6-oz. cans light tuna in oil, drained)
- recipe niçoise vinaigrette (see the recipe below)
 anchovy fillets, rinsed under cold water and patted dried
- 2 Tbs. capers, rinsed (or try caper berries)12 niçoise or other good-quality black olivesFreshly ground black pepper

Put the eggs in a saucepan, cover with cold salted water, and bring to a boil for 10 min. Drain the water and shake the eggs in the pan to crack their shells. Put the eggs in a bowl of ice water until cool. Peel and cut in half (the yolks should still be slightly soft and orange in the center).

Keeping each ingredient separate, dress the greens, potatoes, green beans, tomatoes, and tuna with the vinaigrette. Arrange the greens, vegetables, tuna, and hard-cooked eggs on a platter or individual plates. Drape the anchovies over the tuna and scatter the salad with the capers and olives. Grind some black pepper on the salad and serve immediately.

Niçoise Vinaigrette

Yields about 1 cup.

- 3 Tbs. red-wine vinegar
- 3 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
- 2 Tbs. grainy mustard
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh herbs, preferably a mix of tarragon, chervil, and chives, but flat-leaf parsley or basil will do also

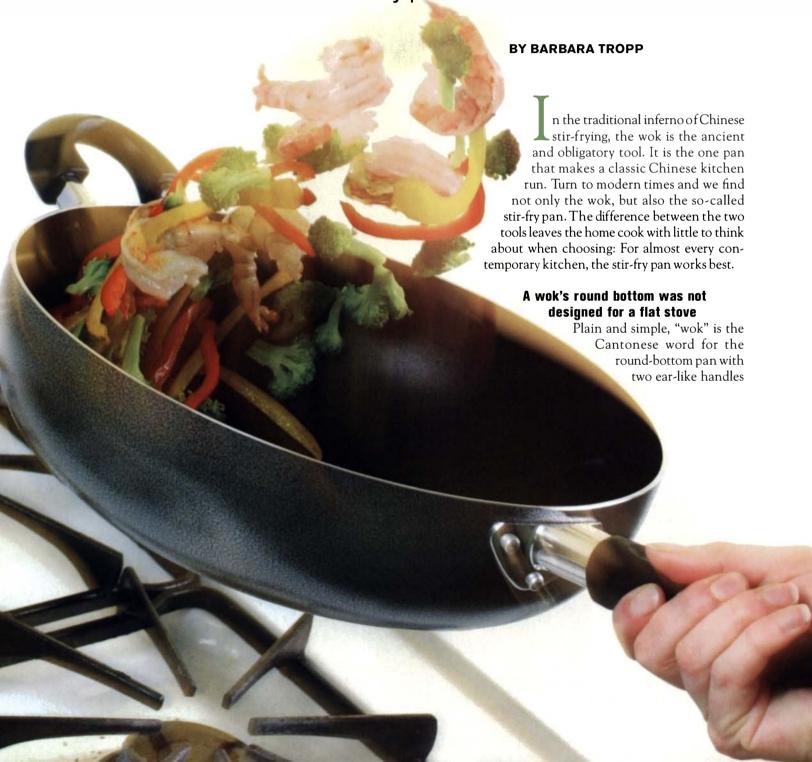
Salt and freshly ground black pepper 3/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Put the vinegar, lemon juice, mustard, and herbs in a small bowl and whisk to mix. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Slowly whisk in the oil until the dressing is emulsified. Taste and adjust the seasonings.

Lisa Hanauer, a food writer, is the former chef-owner of Café Chêneville in Oakland, California. ◆

Consider a Stir-Fry Pan Instead of a Wok

A wok may be traditional, but the newer, flat-bottom stir-fry pans work better on most stoves



that is synonymous with Chinese cooking. A traditional wok was designed to sit in flames—up to its ears. It fit hand-in-glove with the classic Chinese stove: either a wide cylindrical brazier or a low, table-like affair with a big center hole in which the wok nested to within an inch of its rim. The glory of this match was that the *entire* inner surface of the wok blazed immediately with a ferocious, even heat.

The material for the classic wok was unfinished black carbon steel. (You'll occasionally still find these dinosaurs in Chinese shops.) In modern times, spun steel became the metal of choice. Both require the cook to initially seal the surface against rust with a patina of oil and to remain vigilant lest the patina wear away.

On a Western stovetop, the classic round wok is a problem. The wok must perch on a ring above the gas flame or electric coil, where its upper half is simply too far away from the heat. The bottom gets hot, but the sides remain relatively cool. Hence, stir-

The efficient stir-fry pan usually has one friendly long handle and a chunky ear on the other side for easier handling.

frying is slow, and juices are lost as the food steams instead of sears. The patina is next to impossible to keep, except at the bottom where the wok stays reliably hot. Simply put, it's a problem of mismatched surfaces. For the cook, stir-frying in a round wok on a flat stove is like trying to walk across town on toe shoes: You'll get there, but slowly and painfully.

Flat-bottom woks offer some improvement. In the 1980s, when cooking Chinese at home was the thing to do, cookware manufacturers picked up on American frustration with the round wok and developed the flat-bottom wok. The flat-bottom wok was a big step up for American cooks. It got us away from those pesky rings that took the wok where it was never designed to go—away from the source of heat. It heated more quickly than its round-bottom progenitor because it sat flat on the heat source. But the flat bottom was initially quite small, and the top third of the wok still never really got hot.

Then someone got smart and developed the stirfry pan, the perfect match for a flat modern stovetop, be it in San Francisco or Beijing.

The stir-fry pan solves a lot of problems

The main difference in the stir-fry pan is its generous flat bottom—a good couple of inches bigger than the older flat-bottom woks—and a depth of 3 or 4 inches, which beats out a traditional Western sauté pan. It usually has one friendly long handle (wooden or new-age plastic that doesn't get hot as you cook) and often a chunky ear on the other side to make it easier to pick up the pan when it's full. Its interior is nonstick or anodized steel, both with an aluminum core for quick heating. I've seen stir-fry pans for sale all over the globe, snatched up as eagerly in Xian as in Chicago. I love these pans. They grab and hold the heat for beautiful stir-frying, and the generous size and slope of the sides sends food flipping merrily about.

My favorite stir-fry pans are those you'll find in a Chinese kitchenware store. They include such lesser known brands as Cook-Aid, which is anodized, and Joycook, which is nonstick. Even a lightweight like me can lift these pans with ease. And

Why a Western wok is wimpy

The ancient Chinese wok was never intended for the Western stovetop. Here's why:



The original. The traditional Chinese wok sat in a hole over a fire. The entire surface would get blazing hot, creating a very efficient vessel for stir-frying.





72 FINE COOKING

they're cheap: I got the Cook-Aid for \$20, and on its web site (see Sources, p. 84), it retails for \$12.95 plus shipping. The Joycook is \$10 or less.

There are some good stir-fry pans that are more widely distributed. The Meyer Anolon stir-fry pan is a good bet. I like the fact that it's 12 inches across and that it comes with a domed glass lid just like the type I use on my cheapo stir-fry pans but have to buy separately. This helps justify the \$49 price tag for the Anolon. And oil behaves well in its nonstick interior. I also adore the stir-fry pan made by Wearever. The size (12 inches wide; 3½ inches deep), the weight (2½ pounds), the SilverStone ScratchGuard finish, and the friendly curved handle all make it a "10" in my opinion. (See Sources, p. 84, for more information.)

Consider weight and size when shopping for a stir-fry pan. I did try some other pans while writing this article and found that the Joyce Chen stir-fry pan was too heavy, and the Circulon pan was too small. Weight is also the enemy when it comes to the (more expensive) stir-fry pans made by the higher-end manufacturers like All-Clad and Calphalon. While these pans heat well and will last, their heft gets in the way of everyday stir-frying, which often calls for you to turn, tilt, and lift the pot.

You might also come across so-called chef's pans, which are shaped a lot like stir-fry pans. Take a careful look before you buy if stir-frying is what you have in mind. Be especially sure that the pan is roomy enough to toss around a nice amount of food. Many chef's pans measure only 10 inches across, which is pretty small unless you're cooking for one. An 11-or, even better, a 12-inch pan makes more sense. Be sure that it's at last 3 inches deep. Also, check that the pan will be light enough to pick up easily even when full of food. Keep in mind the issues of weight and size when looking around your local kitchenware shops, and you may find some good choices that escaped me.

Finally, let me heartily recommend a nonstick interior when shopping for a stir-fry pan. I have to say I wasn't originally a fan of this innovation; in early nonstick woks, the oil would puddle rather than coat the pan. But the new nonstick surfaces are oil-friendly and never seem to wear out even though I cook with them on high heat. Plus, great news for anyone in our health-conscious times: I now stir-fry with only a third of the oil required by my old spun-steel woks.

Throw out your woks? Maybe not yet.

I still keep a spun-steel wok for smoking foods. Smoking kills the interior of most pans, and spun steel can take the beating for a long time without

From wok to stir-fry pan: an evolution

A classic wok has a rounded bottom and two ear-like handles. On a flat Western stovetop, it

must sit on a separate ring for stability.

A flat-bottomed wok solved one problem of the classic wok: it got the pan closer to the heat source by eliminating the need for the ring.

A stir-fry pan, the ultimate solution, increased the area in which food can come in contact with heat, while still keeping gently sloping sides for easier tossing and stirring.

warping. Also, when I'm cooking for a mob (and a stir-fry pan gets crowded), I haul out a gorgeous 17-inch behemoth made by Kuhn Rikon, surely the most expensive wok on the planet (I received it as a wedding gift). It's the Rolls-Royce of woks.

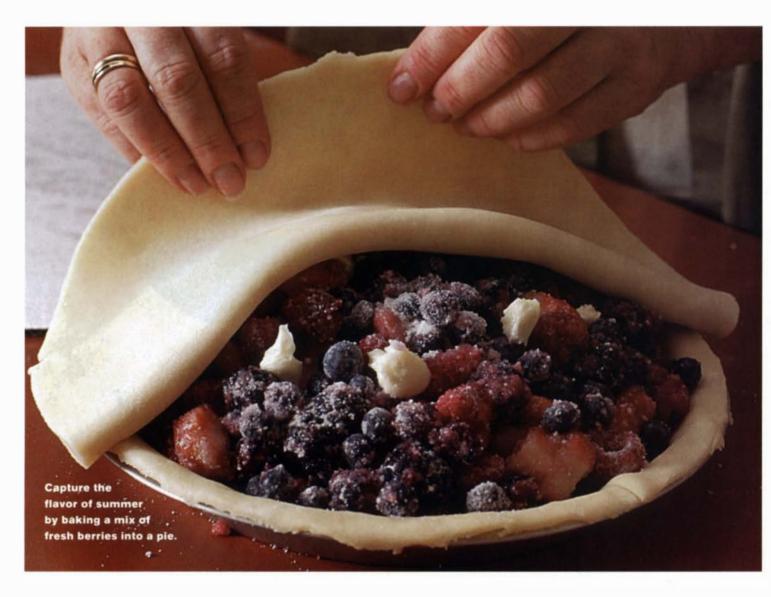
But for everyday use, I'll take my running shoes: my stir-fry pan. For simple use, speed and evenness of heat, and the ability to stir-fry a sizable amount of food with minimal oil, a stir-fry pan can't be beat. Find one that feels good in your hand, put it on the stove, and off you go.

Barbara Tropp is the author of The Modern Art of Chinese Cooking and China Moon Cookbook, the latter named for the San Francisco restaurant where Barbara was the chef-owner for eleven years.

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001 73

os except where noted: Martha Holmberg

How to Bake a Double



An all-butter dough and a light touch give you the flakiest crust that's perfectly balanced with the fruit filling

BY CAROLYN WEIL

ies are hands-down my favorite dessert, but I would be hard-pressed to tell you which part of the pie I like best, the fruit filling or the crust. For some people, the choice is obvious, demonstrated by their plates scraped clean except for the neatly manicured crust edges pushed to the side. Or, as with my young daughter, by the sneak attacks she mounts on any stray chunks of crust sitting unprotected on our plates. When you get a pie right, however, you get a perfect balance of juicy, not-toosweet fruit and buttery, flaky crust—making both parts of the pie irresistible.

While making a good fruit filling does take a little attention (and the right thickener), making the

to this page: Scott Phillips

-Crust Fruit Pie



crust seems to be the part of the pie that inspires discomfort in many people. A double-crust pie needs a crust that's easy to work with and that bakes into a very flaky, American-style crust, as opposed to a crumbly short crust that's suitable for tarts. I'd like to help you feel comfortable making, shaping, baking—and eventually perfecting—this kind of crust.

Butter's better, as long as it's cold

One of the big debates concerning pie crust is what kind of fat to use. Shortening produces a tender and very flaky crust, but it lacks flavor. Some bakers say that a butter crust isn't as flaky as a shortening crust, but I disagree—with the right methods, you

can get great flakiness with butter. Besides, flake isn't the only measure of a delicious crust. I always end any debate by asking, "Would you spread shortening on your toast? Then why use it to wrap around your pie?"

Since butter is key to this crust, choose a highquality butter, one with a low water content. This generally means choosing a brand-name butter rather than a supermarket brand.

The size of the butter chunk is critical. I like to have quite a few chunks in the dough that are at least pea-size (see the photo on p. 76). Big bits of butter translate into big flakes, as the moisture in the butter turns to steam and puffs up that section of

Thick, glossy juices mean the pie is ready.
During cooking, the fruit renders its juices, which get thickened by some starch and by reducing in the oven.

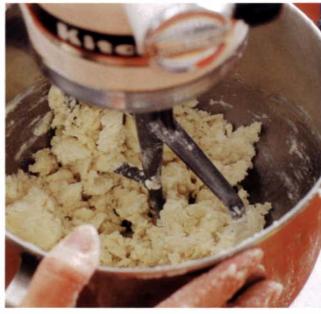
For great pie dough, start cold and keep moving



Cut your butter into the flour until it looks like this. The larger pieces are about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (pea-size) and the smaller pieces form a mealy texture with the flour.



Squeeze the butter to see if it's cold enough. Pinch off some of the flour and butter and mold it into a square. Check your fingers—if they're greasy, the butter's too warm and your mixture needs 15 minutes' chilling. If your fingers are dry, go ahead and add the water.



Add the water, and stop mixing while the texture is still shaggy. Don't try to get the dough smooth at this stage, or you'll develop too much tough gluten.

pastry. If the butter pieces are too small, you may get a tender pastry, but one more crumbly than flaky.

The temperature of the butter is really important, too. Make sure you use it right from the refrigerator (or pop it in the freezer for a few minutes if you're working in a hot kitchen). Cold butter keeps the dough cool, which helps prevent the development of too much gluten in the flour. Just as important, cold butter stays solid longer in the heat of the oven. If the butter starts off too warm, it will immediately melt in the heat of the oven before it has a chance to do its flaky thing.

A stand mixer gives more control

I'm a little different from some bakers in that I prefer to use my stand mixer rather than a food processor to make pie dough. I find that the mixer allows me to complete the dough quickly with a minimum of mixing but still retain control of the dough's consistency. I think the food processor tends to overwork the dough when mixing in the water, so if you want to give the processor a try, use it to cut in the butter, but then dump the flour into a bowl and mix in the water by hand.

Whichever method you use to make the dough, it's important to check your butter and flour mixture to make sure it's still very cold and malleable before you add the water to the dough. Here's a good way to test. When the butter and flour mixture is blended to the desired "pea size," quickly pull out a small amount and play with it. Is it firm? Can you

Seven habits of highly successful fruit pies

Here are seven of Carolyn's pointers that all add up to perfect pie. She advises also to always make a double batch of the dough and stash two disks in the freezer so you can easily put together a pie.

1. Use a metal pie pan. The heat penetrates faster and therefore the bottom crust has a better chance of browning. But be aware that the bottom crust of a double-crust pie will never be crisp—how

could it be, sitting under six cups of juicy fruit?

2. Use a template to cut nicely round dough circles. Carolyn uses cardboard cake circles, but a pot lid works well, too. 3. Always add a pinch of salt to your fruit fillings. It makes the fruit fruitier and the sweetness sweeter.

4. Don't overfill the pie. It's tempting to pile on the berries,

76 FINE COOKING



It may feel strange not to, but don't chill the dough yet. Shape it into two disks and start rolling; you can chill the dough once the pie is assembled. This method is unconventional, but author Carolyn Weil says that ultimately you get the most tender result because you don't have to struggle with a disk of chilled, hard dough.



Feel free to flour the surface, and slide that dough around. Having your dough stick is worse than using too much flour, most of which can be brushed off after rolling anyway. After every few strokes of the rolling pin, free the dough from the surface by sliding and turning it.

mold it into a small cube without your fingers getting greasy? If so, your butter is still cold enough and you can proceed with adding the water. If the butter feels soft and your fingers look greasy, put the mixture—bowl and all—in the refrigerator for 15 to 20 minutes until the butter and flour pieces are firm again. This is a great tip to remember when you're baking on hot summer days.

Rolling the dough right away means no struggle and a tender texture

The next step in my process may seem like heresy to some experienced pie-makers, but trust me, it works beautifully. Once you've added the water to your dough, most recipes have you shape the dough into a disk and then refrigerate it for a period, in order for the butter to get firm again and the gluten in the dough relax. This is all well and good, except than now you're left with a disk of very hard, chilled dough that will take so much muscle to become malleable enough to roll (we've all seen bakers banging their disks with a rolling pin) that the dough gets overworked and tends to crack. I find that rolling out the dough, shaping the pie, and chilling the assembled pie for 15 to 20 minutes before baking produces the perfect texture. But if the dough rounds seems to be getting limp or greasy as you're working, you can just pop them into the refrigerator (on a piece of parchment or a baking sheet) until they're cool enough to work with again. (Recipes follow)

but more fruit releases more juices, and if the level of fruit and juices is higher than the rim of the pan, the juices will leak and spill over.

5. Chill the filled pie for 20 minutes before baking. This

lets the butter in the dough set up and the starch in the thick-eners start to absorb liquid and swell, so they'll perform better in the oven.

6. Watch the bubbles to see

when the pie's done. Juices will probably bubble out of the slits during the latter part of baking. At first the bubbles will be fast, indicating thin juices, but later they'll get lazy and slow, meaning the juices have

thickened and the pie is done.

7. Cool the pie completely before slicing. It's tempting to dig right in, but a hot pie will be liquid inside. You need to let the pie come to room

temperature so that the juices can set up and cloak the berries properly. The ideal serving method is to cool the pie and then gently heat a slice in the oven to get the butter in the crust warm and toasty.

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001

Create a pie that's both pretty and well engineered



Use two hands, fingers wide apart for easy lifting that won't stretch or tear the dough. By first folding the round of dough in half you can easily gauge where to position it on the filling.



Make a strong seal by pressing the two layers of dough together before you begin to fold. The top layer will extend farther than the bottom one.



Get a thick, uniform edge by folding the top layer over the bottom one. This double edge will shape up into a pretty flute that will contain the fruit juices during cooking.



Butter Pie Crust

Yields two 12-inch rounds, enough for one 9-inch double-crust pie.

8 oz. (1 cup) cold unsalted butter 9 oz. (2 cups) all-purpose unbleached flour ¼ cup sugar ¼ tsp. salt ¼ cup cold water

Cut the butter into ½-inch cubes. Dump the flour, sugar, and salt into the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment (or in a large bowl, if mixing the dough by hand). Mix for a second or two to blend the dry ingredients. Add the butter and then, running the mixer on low (or by hand with two knives or a pastry cutter), work the mixture until it's crumbly and the largest pieces of butter are no bigger than a pea (about ¼ inch). The butter should remain cold and firm. To test it, pick up some butter and pinch it between the thumbs and forefingers of both hands to form a little cube. If the butter holds together as a cube and your fingers are not greasy, then the butter is still cold enough. If your fingers look greasy, put the bowl in the refrigerator for 15 min. to firm up the butter before adding the water. As the mixer turns on low (or tossing with a fork if mixing by hand), sprinkle the cold water evenly over the flour and butter. Work the dough until it just pulls together as a shaggy mass.

To roll out the dough for a double-crust pie— Cut the dough in half and pat each piece into a thick flattened ball. Lightly flour your work surface and tap one of the dough balls down with four or five taps of the rolling pan. Begin rolling from the center of your dough outward. Stop the pressure ½ inch from the edge of the dough. Lift the dough and turn by a quarter and repeat the rolling until the dough is at least 12 inches in diameter. Be sure to re-flour the work surface if your dough is sticking.

Using a pot lid or a circle of cardboard as a template, trim the dough to form a 12-inch round (this should give you a $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch margin all around your 9-inch pie pan). Fold the dough in half, slide the outspread fingers of both hands under the dough, and gently lift it and transfer it to the pie pan. Unfold and ease the dough round into the bottom of the pie pan without stretching it.

Roll out the other dough ball and cut a second 12-inch round to be used as the top crust.

Double-Crust Jumble Berry Pie

You can make this pie with only one type of berry if you like, but I love to mix blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, and strawberries. I don't normally like cooked strawberries, but I find that using just a few in this mixture adds a nice floral-fruity lightness to the finished pie. Since all these berries are juicy, I like to use both tapioca and cornstarch to keep the texture of the filling somewhat firm and the juices contained around the fruit. You can use these same measurements for sliced or chunked stone fruit, such as

78 FINE COOKING



Lift up a section of dough and press down on either side to make a graceful vertical flute. The shape will settle down a bit during cooking but will still look nice.



Cut some vents to let off steam. The steam created from the moist fruit during baking needs somewhere to go, so give it an easy escape to avoid unexpected holes and leaks.

peaches, nectarines, or plums. Yields one 9-inch double-crust pie.

- 1 cup sugar
- 2 Tbs. cornstarch
- 2 Tbs. quick-cooking tapioca
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 6 cups washed and well-dried mix of blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, and quartered strawberries
- 1 Tbs. unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
- 1 recipe Butter Pie Crust (at left)

In a large bowl, mix together the sugar, cornstarch, tapioca, and salt. Add the berries and toss with your hands until the berries are evenly coated.

Roll out the pie dough according to the directions in the recipe at left. Pile the berries into the doughlined pie pan, sprinkling any remaining dry ingredients on top. Dot the surface with the butter, cover the berry mixture with the top crust and seal the edges by fluting (see the photos above).

Cut 5 or 6 slits in the top crust to let steam escape during cooking. Heat the oven to 400°F while you chill the pie in the refrigerator for 15 to 20 min. Put the pie on a baking sheet to catch any drips, bake it in the hot oven for 15 min., and then reduce the temperature to 350°F. Continue baking until the crust is golden and the filling juices that are bubbling through the vents and edges are thick, glossy, and slow, another 50 to 60 min. For the best texture for serving, cool the pie completely (which may take up

to 5 hours), and then reheat slices or the whole pie just slightly before serving. (Cooling completely allows the filling juices to firm up, while a quick reheat makes the pastry nice and flaky.) You can serve the pie while it's still warm, but the filling will be slightly liquid; definitely don't serve the pie hot, as the juices will be too fluid.



Thickening the juices means more flavor in every bite

As fresh fruit cooks in a pie, it releases lots of juices—delicious but thin juices that, if not thickened somehow, will make the crust soggy and pool up on the plate.

Some cooks use flour to bind and thicken the juices, but I find that the texture can be a bit gritty and that the flour turns the juices slightly cloudy. I prefer to use a mix of cornstarch and quick-cooking tapioca, which both set clear when fully cooked and cooled. Using all cornstarch would make the filling gummy, and all tapioca would make it seem dry, but the two balance each other. The cornstarch thickens the juices, while the tapioca adds texture without making the filling too gummy. If the texture of the tapioca is too pronounced, next time try grinding it to a powder in the food processor first.

Carolyn Weil is a pastry chef and former bakery owner who strives to make baking approachable to home cooks through her teaching and writing. She's a contributor to The Collective Wisdom of the Bakers Dozen, due out this November.

BY MOLLY STEVENS

Capture summer flavors in a bottle of herb vinegar

A great way to extend the life of your summer herbs is to make herb-flavored vinegar. The high acidity of vinegar extracts flavor from the herbs without any cooking, chopping, or fussing. The acidity also means that an herbinfused vinegar will keep indefinitely without spoiling. And herb vinegars are a versatile addition to your pantry: Use them in salad dressings and sauces, to perk up soups or stews, or to liven up broiled chicken or steamed vegetables and fish.

The best vinegars to use for infusing are white-wine or Champagne vinegar. Although many books on preserving recommend using distilled white vinegar, one whiff (or taste, if you dare) is all you need to determine that this harsh, clear vinegar is not something you want to cook with. Instead, the mellower and more complex flavors of white-wine or Champagne vinegar are ideal. Red-wine and apple-cider vinegars also work well, as long as you realize that their stronger flavors might mask the flavor of subtle herbs.

Rinse and dry the herbs before adding them to the vinegar. If you find any pests nestled in the leaves, give the sprigs a swish in salted water first, and then rinse and dry them. Drop the herbs into a clean glass bottle and pour in the vinegar. Use about 1 cup of herb sprigs per quart of vinegar. Seal the bottle with a cork or cap and set it aside to steep in a dark place for at least two weeks and as long as

six weeks. The timing depends on the type and quantity of herbs and the strength of their flavors (fresh garden herbs are more potent than those from the supermarket). Sample the vinegar after two weeks and, if it doesn't have much flavor, set it aside for a few more weeks.

To strain or not is a question of aesthetics. Once the vinegar has the flavor you want, you can certainly strain it if you don't like the look of washed-out herbs floating around in your vinegar. Use a fine-mesh strainer or a coffee

filter. Vinegars flavored with

edible flowers of any sort (chive, nasturtium, or any herb blossoms) tend to look rather hazy from the pollen and are much prettier after straining. (Flowers do add a

Good herbs for making vinegar

• chives

(use blossoms and leaves)

• dill

(use seeds and leaves)

• mint

(combine with orange zest)

- nasturtium flowers (nice with dill, too)
- rosemary

(combine with thyme, lavender, savory, and a garlic clove for a Provençal mix)

- tarragon
- thyme
- other additions:

citrus zest, a split shallot, a clove of garlic, a few peppercorns or coriander seeds.

lovely blush color to whitewine vinegars.) When giving an herb vinegar as a gift, I like to strain it and then add a single fresh sprig of herb just to indicate the flavor.

Freeze berries on baking sheets

There's a simple way to preserve summer's ripe berries that requires no cooking, no jars, and best of all, no time. The only thing you need is a freezer large enough (or empty enough) to hold a single baking sheet.

Choose ripe berries without blemishes or bruises. Rinse the berries quickly if necessary, and then arrange them in a single layer, without touching, on a baking sheet. (A sheet of waxed paper or parchment will keep the baking sheet clean.) Set the berries in the freezer until they're frozen solid—this will take anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours, depending on your freezer. Once the berries are hard, slide them off the sheet and into a zip-top freezer bag. The berries won't stick together, and you can take out as many as you want at any given time. Use the berries as a dessert topping, in sauces, and in other recipes calling for fresh berries. Expect them to last up to a year in the freezer if kept tightly wrapped.



Hardwood charcoal vs. charcoal briquettes

Whenever Fine Cooking runs a story on outdoor grilling, it seems that our expert authors always recommend cooking over natural hardwood charcoal (sometimes called charwood) instead of the more easily found charcoal briquettes. Is this just barbecue snobbery? Hardly. There are some very real differences between hardwood charcoal and briquettes that do have an effect on grilling.

Hardwood charcoal

- Made from only natural hardwood, such as maple, oak, mesquite or even hickory.
- Once the wood is reduced to charcoal, it's left in its original rough shape. In fact, the best way to determine the quality of the charcoal is to look at it—if you can recognize the shapes of real wood, you've got the real thing.
- Lights more quickly.
- ◆ Burns hotter (around 1,000°F), so you should make a smaller or more spread-out fire than you would with briquettes.
- · Creates less ash.
- Imparts a purer, wood-fire flavor to foods.
- Any hardwood charcoal not completely burned during grilling may be put out and re-lit on another occasion for more grilling.

Charcoal briquettes

 Made from the sawdust of scrap wood (including resinous soft woods and composite woods).



- Combined with chemical binders and filler (including coal dust) and manually compressed into their characteristic pillow shapes.
- Slower to light, often requiring lighter fluid.
- ◆ Burns cooler (closer to 700° to 800°F).
- Burns more quickly, meaning a shorter window for grilling, or requiring that you add more during grilling.
- Smoke produced may be neutral at best and can contribute harsh and off-tasting flavors to grilled foods.
- Contributes more pollutants to the air as it burns.

—Molly Stevens is a contributing editor to Fine Cooking. ◆



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Fresh fruits are made of living, breathing cells. Even when a fruit is picked from the plant, its cells are still alive and continue to carry on natural cell processes like taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide, just as our own cells do.

But when you heat fruit, the cells die and undergo dramatic changes that cause the cells to leak water and soften. The longer you heat the fruit, the more softening and water loss occurs; in other words, the more its texture changes.

Genetics play a big role in the texture of cooked fruit. For example, some types of apples are "good for cooking," meaning they'll hold together and have some toothiness, while others quickly turn to mush when heated. But as you'll see, there are other factors that can affect the texture of cooked fruit, such as its ripeness, when or whether you add sugar, and how you cook it.

Ripe fruit gets tender faster

Someone once asked Jacques Pépin how long it takes to poach a pear, and he responded, "From 2 minutes to 1 hour." He explained that it all depends on the ripeness of the pear.

Botanically speaking, fruits are the plant's ripened ova-

82

ries, which contain the seeds. (By this definition, many foods that we call vegetables are actually fruits: tomatoes, peppers, avocados, cucumbers, eggplant, snow peas, and snap beans.) When the seeds are mature, many chemical changes occur and the fruit ripens. The green

Raspberries

water turn to mush.

cooked in

soluble pectins, and dissolve. The fruit becomes soft and tender. Such a sweet, tender fruit will take just minutes to cook.

Raspberries

cooked in a

sugar syrup stay intact.

Unfortunately, much of our grocery-store fruit is picked well before it reaches its perfect state of ripeness. If you're stuck with rock-

How long does it take to poach a pear to tenderness?

Depends on how ripe it is.

chlorophyll breaks down and bright, alluring colors take its place, delicious aromatic compounds and flavors form, and big starch molecules begin to break down into sweet sugars, or the fruit starts storing up sugar sap to become sweeter.

During ripening, the fruit's texture changes completely, too. Firm, insoluble substances (hemicelluloses and pectic substances) break down, convert to water-

hard, odorless, flavorless fruit, don't be surprised if it takes much longer to cook than riper fruit and needs the addition of other sweet, fragrant ingredients to become palatable.

Adding sugar can preserve a fruit's shape

In addition to how ripe the fruit is, you should also consider whether to add sugar or ingredients that contain calcium.

Sugar can save cooked fruit from a soft or mushy fate. It does this by slowing down the conversion of those insoluble pectic substances (the cell "glue," in a sense) into water-soluble pectin. How might you use this to your advantage? Let's go back to Jacques's poached pears. If your pears are very ripe, adding sugar to the poaching liquid can prevent them from getting mushy. But if the pears are hard and underripe, don't add any sugar to the poaching liquid. Instead, poach the pears until they're fork-tender (or as soft as you want them) and then add sugar to sweeten them.

Fragile fruit cooked with sugar remains intact, while without the sugar, it becomes mush. If you drop fragile berries into a concentrated sugar syrup to cook, the high sugar concentration on the outside of the fruit will pull water out of the fruit but still maintain the firmness of the pectic substances around the cell walls. Without the concentrated sugar syrup, the

FINE COOKING

berries would fall apart as they cooked.

Firmer fruit, however, can shrivel and toughen with too much sugar. A good procedure for cooking firm fruit like apples is to start the apples in water or in a weak sugar solution. This tenderizes the fruit a little but doesn't draw out enough water to cause shriveling. As the fruit cooks, you can add more and more sugar to keep the pectic substances (and thus the fruit) firm.

Brown sugar, molasses, and hard water, all of which contain calcium, can also maintain texture. Calcium prevents mushiness differently than sugar does. It reacts with the pectic substances to form insoluble

calcium compounds that make food firmer. Calcium compounds are sometimes added to canned tomatoes and fragile fruits like raspberries during processing to prevent them from losing their shape. If you're making a raspberry sauce and you want the fruit to maintain some shape, try cooking the berries with a tablespoon or so of brown sugar.

Finally, using pieces of fruit in ice cream can be problematic because of the fruit's high water content, which causes it to turn into icy pebbles. You can avoid this by soaking the fruit for several hours in a sugar syrup before adding it to the ice cream. This will slow the freezing of the fruit

by lowering its freezing temperature.

Fast cooking means firmer fruit

Another way to control a fruit's texture (although not as effective as adding sugar or calcium) is by how you cook it.

Rapid, high-heat cooking, such as grilling, broiling, or boiling in water, will keep fruit firm, in large part because there's simply less time for the cells to leak and soften. Immediate contact with high temperatures does something else, too: It kills enzymes in the fruit that would otherwise contribute to the cell's deterioration. The faster cooking, however, makes more of a difference.

So if you're aiming for a chunky rather than a smooth peach preserve, you'll have better luck plunging the peaches into a rapidly boiling sugar syrup than if you cooked them for a longer time by bringing the peaches, sugar, and water to a boil together.

The other side of the coin is that slow cooking and lower temperatures can help soften hard, unripe fruit. Lower temperatures let the enzymes stay alive longer to aid in softening the fruit.

Food scientist Shirley O.
Corriher, a contributing editor to Fine Cooking, is the author of the award-winning book,
Cook Wise.

83





READER SERVICE NO. 66

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2001

SOURCES

Kitchen Detail

To find out more about Wood-Mode's base pull-out cart, visit one of its showrooms. A listing can be found on its web site, wood-mode.com, or by writing to the company: Wood-Mode Inc., 1 Second St., Kreamer, PA 17833.

Catalan Menu

Many well-stocked supermarkets now carry manchego cheese, but if you can't find it or if you're not satisfied with the quality, try Murray's Cheese Shop in New York City (888/692-4339; murrayscheese .com), which also sells Mahón and many other Spanish cheeses.

Caesar Salad

To make her Caesar salad dressing, Ana Sortun uses a large, handcrafted, olivewood mortar and pestle made in Tuscany. It's sold for \$60 by The Clown (207/3676348; the-clown.com). Davenport House (davenporthouse.com; 888/470-4950) carries an array of Mason Cash ceramic mortars and pestles. The 6-inch mortar (\$39) is the ideal size for Caesar dressing. Cooking.com carries a wide variety of mortars and pestles, including the Mason Cash line.

Feta

To find good-quality feta at your supermarket, try the deli counter and ask for a sample before buying. Middle Eastern, Russian, and Greek groceries tend to carry a variety of feta styles. Mt. Vikos is



one good producer; its traditional and barrel-aged Greek fetas are sold at Wegmans, Larry's Markets, Whole Foods, and some supermarkets. Buying feta by mail is an option, but shipping costs can be prohibitive and there's no guarantee that the cheese will arrive in good condition (of eight fetas we ordered by mail, one was spoiled and another was on its way out). If you're game, try Zingerman's (888/636-8162; zingermans.com) or Formaggio Kitchen (888/212-3224).

Stir-Fry Pans

The Wearever pan (800/527-7727; wearever.com) is sold in major retail stores, including Walmart and Target. For information on the Joycook pan call 800/ 525-6732 or visit joycook.com. The Meyer Anolon pan (800/

326-3933; anolon.com) is sold in major department stores and cookware stores.

Tuna Confit

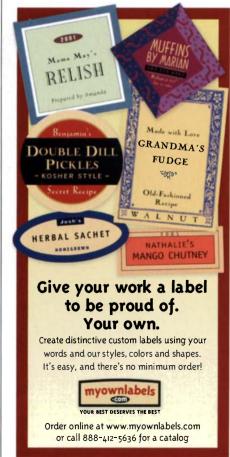
Zingerman's (info at left in Feta listing) sells Ventresa tuna from Spain. A 4-oz. can is \$15.

Peoples Woods in Rhode Island (800/729-5800) sells lump hardwood charcoal and hardwood chunks. B&B Charcoal in Texas (877/725-8815) sells lump charcoal, wood chunks, and chips.

Artisan Foods

Forni-Brown-Welsh doesn't sell retail, but they do hold an annual plant sale every April, and it's open to the public. For more information, call 707/942-6123.





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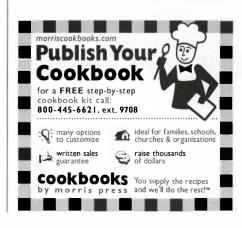
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	10		-	
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San Francisco Herb Co.	62	www.sfherb.com	r .	
The School of Gourmet	62	www.smerb.com	p. 85	
Cooking	12		p. 85	
	-			
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SpecialTeas, Inc.	84	www.specialteas.com	p. 87	
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Vic Firth Mfg.	16		p. 81	
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Wine Technologies, Inc.	22	www.winetech.com	р. 86	
World of Cheese	68	www.worldofcheese.com	p. 31	
Wusthof	73	www.wusthof.com	p. 9	

INDEX

RECIPES

COVER RECIPE

Double-Crust Jumble Berry Pie, 78

APPETIZERS

Catalan Mushrooms with Garlic & Parsley, 37

Grilled Bread with Red Peppers & Eggplant, 38

Grilled Leeks with Roasted Pepper Vinaigrette & Goat Cheese, 65

MAIN DISHES

Agujas (Mexican grilled steaks), 24
Grilled Pork Blade Chops with
Thai Marinade, 44
Grilled Pork Rib Chops with

Grilled Pork Rib Chops with Fresh Herb Rub, 44

Grilled Thin Pork Chops in Adobo

Paste, 45 Fish/Shellfish

Fish Steamed with Ham, Mushrooms, Ginger, Garlic & Scallions, 90 Master Recipe for Tuna Confit, 68 Penne with Fresh Tuna Confit, 70 Salade Niçoise with Fresh Tuna

White Bean Salad with Fresh Tuna Confit, 69

Confit, 70

Salmon Fillets with Herbed Leeks, 65

Chicken Thighs Baked with Lemon, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme, 38

Feta-Stuffed Chicken Braised with Green Olives, 56

Grilled Chicken-Arugula Salad with Grilled Tomato Salsa, 52 Vegetable Main Dish

Fusilli with Feta & Lemon-Caper Pesto, 56

Grilled Cherry Tomato Pasta with Crisp Breadcrumbs & Basil, 51

PASTA & RICE

Fusilli with Feta & Lemon-Caper Pesto, 56 Grilled Cherry Tomato Pasta with Crisp Breadcrumbs & Basil, 51

Penne with Fresh Tuna Confit, 70

SALADS

Caesar Salad, 46 Green Salad with Olives &

Manchego, 38 Herb, Feta & Beet Salad, 57

White Bean Salad with Fresh Tuna Confit, 69

SOUPS, STEWS & STOCKS

Grilled Yellow Tomato Bisque, 51 Leek & Potato Soup, 64

SIDE DISHES

Basic Grilled Tomatoes, 50 Spinach Sautéed with Pine Nuts & Raisins, 39

Grilled Leeks with Roasted Red Pepper Vinaigrette & Goat Cheese, 65

SAUCES, CONDIMENTS & SEASONINGS

Adobo Paste, 45

Brown Sugar & Molasses Brine, 44

Cilantro-Mint Sauce, 45

Fresh Herb Rub, 44

Fresh Plum Salsa, 45

Nicoise Vinaigrette, 70

Pico de Gallo, 24

Romesco Sauce, 37

Salsa de Serrano o Jalapeño Asado (Grilled serrano or jalapeño sauce), 24

Thai Marinade, 44

DESSERTS, CAKES & PASTRY

Butter Pie Crust, 78 Double-Crust Jumble Berry Pie, 78 Italian Plum Cobbler, 61 Plum Upside-Down Cakes, 60

NUTRITION INFORMATION

Recipe (analysis per serving)	Page	Cal	ories	Protein	Carb	U (Fat	s (g)		Chol	Sodium	Fiber	Notes
	- 1	total	from fat	(g)	(g)	total	sat	mond	poly	(mg)	(mg)	(g)	
Agujas	24	400	270	31	1	30	12	13	1	120	360	0	meat only
Salsa de Serrano o Jalapeño Asado	24	20	0	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	150	1	
Pico de Gallo	24	30	0	1.	7	0	0	0	0	0	150	1	
Catalan Mushrooms w/Garlic & Parsley	37	100	80	2	4	9	1	7	1	0	320	1	
Romesco Sauce	37	170	130	3	8	15	2	10	2	0	220	2	per 1/4 cup
Green Salad w/Olives & Manchego	38	150	110	4	8	12	2	8	1	5	340	3	w/o anchovies
Chicken Thighs w/Lemon & Sage	38	380	240	32	5	26	6	13	5	115	430	2	
Grilled Bread w/Peppers & Eggplant	38	210	60	5	35	7	1	5	1	0	390	8	using 1/4 tsp. olive oil)
Spinach w/Pine Nuts & Raisins	39	160	110	7	12	12	2	7	2	0	410	6	
Brown Sugar & Molasses Brine	44	10	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	870	0	per 3 Tbs. brine/chop
Grilled Rib Pork Chops w/Herb Rub	44	390	200	41	5	22	8	10	2	115	1920	1	w/brine
Grilled Blade Pork Chops w/Marinade	44	590	390	38	11	44	15	19	5	135	2690	1	w/o brine
Grilled Thin Pork Chops in Adobo Paste	45	430	220	46	5	25	8	12	2	130	580	2	
Fresh Plum Salsa	45	40	0	1	10	0	0	0	0	0	180	1	based on 6 servings
Cilantro-Mint Sauce	45	25	20	0	1	2.5	0.5	1	1	0	85	0	based on 6 servings
Caesar Salad	46	230	180	7	8	20	4	13	2	45	1040	2	based on 6 servings
Basic Grilled Tomatoes	50	100	70	1	6	8	1	6	1	0	170	1	
Grilled Yellow Tomato Bisque	51	220	160	5	12	18	10	6	1	55	490	2	
Grilled Cherry Tomato Pasta	51	280	90	7	42	10	1	7	1	0	290	3	based on 10 servings
Grilled Chicken Salad w/Tomato Salsa	52	440	180	57	9	20	5	12	2	85	670	2	
Fusilli w/Feta & Lemon-Caper Pesto	56	420	190	14	44	21	6	12	2	30	820	4	
Chicken Stuffed w/Feta & Green Olives	56	560	320	49	3	36	12	16	6	205	750	0	
Herb, Feta & Beet Salad	57	250	150	8	20	17	5	4	7	25	700	6	
Plum Upside-Down Cakes	60	560	280	4	67	31	19	9	1	135	180	1	
Italian Plum Cobbler	61	360	160	4	49	18	10	5	1	55	180	3	based on 8 servings
Master Recipe for Tuna Confit	68	60	30	7	0	3	0.5	2	0.5	15	85	0	per oz. tuna
White Bean Salad w/Fresh Tuna Confit	69	350	200	16	24	22	3	16	2	15	490	9	based on 6 servings
Penne w/Fresh Tuna Confit	70	550	250	26	47	28	4	20	3	35	820	3	based on 4 servings
Salade Niçoise w/Fresh Tuna Confit	70	690	460	26	34	51	8	35	5	240	1280	6	
Leek & Potato Soup	64	170	80	4	19	9	3	5	1	10	360	2	w/1 tsp. créme fraîche
Salmon Fillets w/Herbed Leeks	65	410	220	34	11	25	5	13	5	100	990	2	w/1 tsp. oil for drizzling
Grilled Leeks w/Red Pepper Vinaigrette	65	450	330	6	28	36	7	24	3	10	400	4	per serving
Butter Pie Crust	78	340	210	4	30	23	14	7	1	60	75	1	per 1/8 double-crust
Double-Crust Jumble Berry Pie	78	510	230	5	70	25	15	7	1	65	150	5	based on 8 slices
Fish Steamed w/Ham & Mushrooms	90	160	70	18	3	8	1	3	3	40	500	0	per appetizer serving

The nutritional analyses have been calculated by a registered dietitian at The Food Consulting Company of San Diego, California. When a recipe gives a choice of ingredients, the first choice is the one used in

the calculations. Optional ingredients and those listed without a specific quantity are not included. When a range of ingredient amounts or servings is given, the smaller amount or portion is used.

QUICK & DELICIOUS

BY STELLA FONG

Steamed fish in a flash

Steaming is my favorite way to cook fish. It's quick, it's healthy, and it always tastes fresh and clean.

My favorite fish to steam is firm white fish, such as cod or sea bass, but the strong accompanying flavors in this recipe—earthy shiitakes, salty ham, bright ginger, pungent garlic, woodsy sherry, salty soy sauce, and nutty sesame oil—would also stand up to a salmon fillet. Shrimp is another good option.

In this recipe, the fish is steamed on a plate to catch all the juices for a delightful sauce. The plate should be heatproof and needs to fit in your steamer without touching its sides so that the steam can circulate.

To steam the fish, I use a Chinese bamboo steamer set over a wok or a pot of boiling water. Several steamers can be stacked on top of one another, so I can easily double the recipe to serve four as a main dish, and I can also steam some rice at the same time.

If you don't have a bamboo steamer, you can use a pot with a flat-bottom steamer insert, or you can rig your own steamer. Just cut the top and bottom from a tuna can to use as a support for the plate and find a covered pot deep and wide enough to accommodate everything.

Once you've set up your steamer and gathered your ingredients, this dish comes together in a flash. A quick sauté in oil for the shiitakes, ham, ginger, and garlic jump-starts their flavor, and then it's into the steamer with everything.

I usually steam the fish until it feels softly firm and looks opaque when cut into the center with a knife. Once I've moved the fish to serving plates, all that's left to do is drizzle it with soy sauce, sprinkle it with sliced scallions, and serve.

Stella Fong teaches Asian cooking to children and adults in Billings, Montana, and on the West Coast. ◆



Fish Steamed with Ham, Mushrooms, Ginger, Garlic & Scallions

I prefer smoky, salty country ham for this dish, but prosciutto or even baked ham will also work. If you don't have peanut oil on hand, substitute any vegetable oil. Serve the fish with steamed rice to soak up every delicious drop of the sauce. Serves two as a main dish or four as an appetizer.

- 1 Tbs. peanut oil
- 3 medium-size fresh shiitake mushrooms, stems discarded, caps thinly sliced
- 1 oz. country ham, prosciutto, or any other ham, cut into small dice (about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup)
- 2 tsp. finely chopped fresh ginger
- 1 small clove garlic, minced
- 3/4 lb. skinless cod, sea bass, haddock, or salmon fillet, cut in half
- 1 Tbs. dry sherry
- 1 Tbs. toasted sesame oil
- 1 Tbs. soy sauce or to taste
- 2 Tbs. thinly sliced scallions

Heat the peanut oil in a sauté pan (preferably nonstick) over medium heat. Add the mushrooms, ham, ginger, and garlic. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the mushrooms are tender, 2 to 3 min. Set aside to cool.

Meanwhile, bring a few inches of water to a boil in your steamer (see the text at left.)

Put the fish on a heatproof plate that will fit in your steamer. Sprinkle the mushroom mixture on top. Drizzle with the sherry and sesame oil. Carefully put the plate in the steamer. Cover and steam until the fish is just cooked through, about 10 min.

Transfer the fish and juices to serving plates. Drizzle with the soy sauce, sprinkle with the scallions, and serve immediately.

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ARTISAN FOODS

BY AMY ALBERT



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Hand-Farmed and Custom-Grown

Twenty years ago, Lynn Brown was growing organic produce for northern California greengrocers and food co-ops, "banging my head against the wall to figure out a way to support my family." When chefs began approaching him, describing exactly what they wanted out of organic produce, "a light bulb went on," he says. Soon after, Peter Forni and Barney Welsh joined in, and the three dedicated themselves to custom-growing organic lettuces, greens, vegetables, and herbs for Napa Valley chefs on their six-acre farm in Calistoga, California. Forni-Brown-Welsh pioneered this custom-growing approach, and in the process they've built a client list that's a virtual "Who's Who" of northern California's finest chefs, who often list Forni-Brown-Welsh specialties like

lollo rossa lettuce, baby tat soi greens, and chiogga beets by name on their menus.

Chefs are demanding clients, though, and supplying them with consistently superior produce week after week as the seasons change isn't easy. "Anyone can grow beautiful arugula in May, but growing it from February through New Year's Eve—that's the challenge," says Lynn. While commercial farmers might turn their land two times a year, Forni-Brown-Welsh grows intensively and sequentially, turning the land on the tiny farm six times a year. That's a lot of activity in a small amount of acreage, but this micro scale lets the three partners pay close attention, adjusting planting cycles as the seasons change and the daylight shifts, to meet their clients' exacting desires.



Mizuna, arugula, and other specialty greens will be served just a few hours after being hand-picked, hand-trimmed, and hand-packed.



Beautiful—and edible. Society garlic blossoms will add color and pungency to a salad of freshly picked lettuces.